



The 1939 film opens with the familiar 20th Century-Fox logo. A few years earlier the studio was formed from merging two smaller companies, 20th Century and Fox, with Chase National Bank as the controlling financial resource. In addition to the Hollywood studio the company owned or controlled many movie theatres in the West, and this is where the money was made. The audience was largely rural and small town transplants from the Middle West.

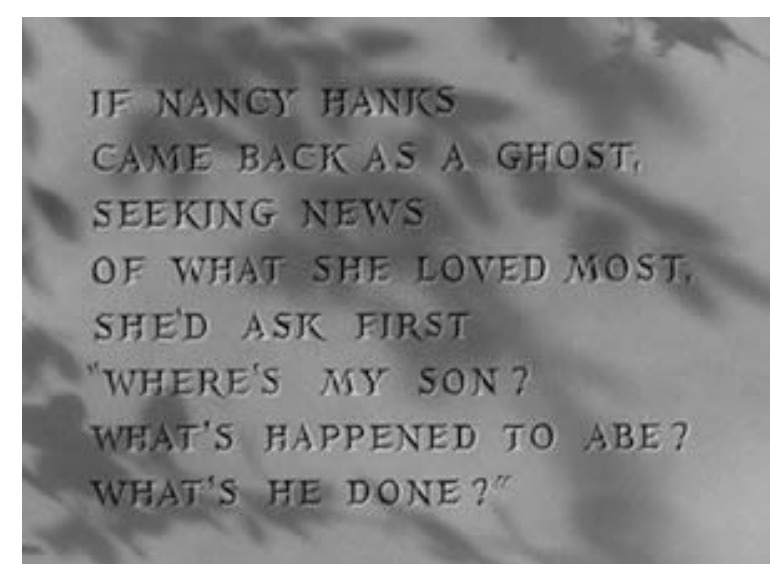
## Young Mr. Lincoln and ideological analysis: a reconsideration (with many asides)

by Chuck Kleinhans

In 1970 the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* published “*Young Mr. Lincoln*, texte collectif,” an article written by all the editors, which, upon translation into English in *Screen* (UK) as “John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*,” in 1972, became a landmark essay in Anglo-American film theory. The essay was quickly referenced, commented on, and republished repeatedly in film theory anthologies. The commentaries produced a cottage industry of new studies of the 1939 film. My concern here is to mark the place of the original essay and its subsequent discussion. It needs some context for a new generation, some 40 years later. Because the French article became so central to key issues in emerging film studies, today’s reader finds many paths leading through and out of the essay, many tangents that turn out to be useful for grasping the essay in the abstract and in history. And it also lets us think about the historical vicissitudes of film theorizing. Reconsideration today also aptly opens further thought in terms of Spielberg’s *Lincoln* and the larger project of ideological analysis.



The opening titles and credits are presented as carved in stone: “for the ages.” The last shot in the film is of a monument: the Lincoln Memorial.



The opening credits segue into a short poem by Rosemary Benet asking, in the voice of Lincoln’s mother, who died early in his life, asking what became of her son. The audience already knows the answer. Thus Lincoln is framed as “for all time,” but there’s a contradiction because the work of the film must tell an interesting story.

Knowing that different readers will read this in different ways, I’ve decided on a rambling format. Some people who may have read, and taught, the essay many times can just easily skip through to the points which are new and substantial. Others, far less familiar with the essay may want to have a copy of the original essay at hand, view the film again, and read some of the critical commentary. For that purpose I supply a “student’s guide” form of bibliography at the end. For beginners, skimming might be the best way to go for a first excursion. I hope this strategy might open up further discussion and exploration of the *Cahiers* essay and the critical staging of media theory at the time. Many of today’s media folks,





The last shot in the film. *Cahiers* argues that the entire film leads to this point: the presentation of a mythic and eternal Lincoln that fits a Republican and Big Business agenda to win the 1940 Presidential election and reverse the New Deal.



The first shot of Lincoln comes after he is introduced by a politician as running for the state legislature. He is found reclining in a chair, with his feet up, a significant gesture repeated through the film. His clothing, simple and homespun with sturdy boots, confirms his informality that is presented verbally when he stands and makes a short direct speech. Lincoln reclining and stretching across the frame marks him thinking, reflecting; he stands to deliver a conclusion. There is very little conversation showing development or process or exchange.



The first action shot begins with a covered wagon arriving in New Salem, 1832. The same

relying on weak summaries and attitude-heavy claims about the period (such as dismissals based on slogans like “Grand Narratives”) have a meager knowledge of what really went on. Visiting the source, or revisiting it with eyes wide open, can be enlightening.

## What was at stake?

Early in the essay, the editors make a remarkable claim:

“In Hollywood, more than anywhere else the cinema is not ‘innocent.’ Creditor of the capitalist system, subject to its constraints, its crises, its contradictions, *the American cinema, the main instrument of the ideological super-structure*, is heavily determined at every level of its existence.” [Emphasis added]

If this assertion were written by one author in a casual film review, one might take this as a careless exaggeration. Written by a group of editors, knowing it was their next major theoretical essay and would stand as a key case study to buttress their new political direction, it is astonishing: Hollywood cinema is the main instrument of the ideological superstructure. If this were so, then the newly proclaimed Marxist editors would be the vanguard of intellectuals analyzing capitalist society. Other Marxists might study the economy, other Marxists might be primarily concerned with governmental politics, but *Cahiers* was dissecting the main instrument of domination in the era of bourgeois capitalism. Few film critics have ever claimed to take up such a weighty responsibility.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In its own time, the film journal’s *Young Mr. Lincoln* (hereafter, *YML*) piece resulted in further critique in the Anglophone film-studies world as it became one of the most anthologized, taught, and referenced essays in film theory. In many ways, it set a pattern for a dominant tradition in ideological analysis of Hollywood film. By putting forward the idea of a symptomatic reading of a film, the *Cahiers*’ approach invited critics and viewers to look at the surface of a film text in the same way a doctor looks at the overt data of a patient in making a diagnosis. The physician considers what are readily observable facts on the outside—temperature, pulse, blood pressure, skin rash, and so forth—to figure out what is going on “inside” the patient. And the art and science of diagnosis depend on making increasingly subtle judgments, refined guesses, and gathering elusive threads into a clear pattern. Similarly, clinical psychology since Freud, especially indebted to the medical model, begins by looking at the open manifestations of hidden disorder. The observable (even when displaced as in dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, etc.) provides clues to the secretive.

Applied to the aesthetic text of a film, the symptomatic reading finds almost anything within the scope of analysis: formal choices of cinematography and editing, styles of acting, the soundtrack, narrative ellipses and reversals, and so forth. All are clues to a less obvious meaning. And how did one know in advance the hidden underpinning? For Marxists it came down to the nature of capitalist society. And very quickly, various critics saw that the absences could also be used to analyze gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, and many other repressions in image media.

The approach meshed well with some important emerging trends in film and media studies. With increased attention to form and close reading as the field developed within academics, critics were concerned to explain what they observed with much finer detail. The earlier norm had been that writers had limited viewing opportunities to see a particular work, and writing on cinema was dominated by journalistic reviewers.[2] The *Cahiers* editors remark within their essay about the way that repeated viewings made certain points clear to them.[3] Later in the decade, the building of rental distribution, film libraries, and archives allowed for repeated viewings of films. Before that, critics had to work within the limits of finite theatrical first-runs, the rare retrospective with only one viewing, or the happenstance of the broadcast television late-night-movie ghetto. Then the arrival



wagon will appear in the final sequence, with the Clay family leaving after the trial.



A family in a wagon pass Lincoln's country store, offering to barter a barrel for some cloth. When he hears there are some books in the barrel, he is alert and excited. The incident confirms the commonplace knowledge of Abe being self educated and eager to read and learn. The first book he finds is *Blackstone's Commentaries* and in awe he says "Law!" Thus the foundation of his career seems to arrive by predestination.

of videotape in the later 1970s opened a vast access, at least to the most salable classics. Writers had much more ability to compare and contrast films, advancing authorship studies and genre studies in particular. The biggest payoff came in improving close analysis.

But a political impulse for ideological analysis of cinema was always present and often dominant. The development of feminist, gay and lesbian, and race politics and cultural analysis went hand in hand with a more traditional class-based consideration. While the most familiar form of political analysis until the 1970s stressed "image," "realism," and interpreting the most surface level of narration, the new mode of critique argued for a more complex and deeper view of film art and communication. Today that richer view extends from the most philosophical media theory to the popular discussion of new films and television, from research on the effects of current social media on shaping individual consciousness to cross-cultural conflicts in global communications.

## Some context

Les *Cahiers du cinéma* [Cinema Notebooks], founded in the early 1950s by an enthusiastic youthful group around critic André Bazin, quickly became the premier film journal in the world, famously promoting the auteur theory, granting creative power to the director working within the constraints of commercial cinema, even the factory-like Hollywood operation.[4] Key *Cahiers* writers became founding figures in the French New Wave and increased the magazine's prestige and overseas appeal. Dedicated to taking film seriously, the intellectuals around *Cahiers* could initially be seen as cineastes fueled by cinephilia and passionately pursuing Bazin's central question, "What is cinema?" But further intellectual (and political) developments began to change the agenda in the 1960s. Structuralism offered a new way of thinking about aspects of culture even as it further expanded into semiotics. A revival of Brecht, both in the theater and in the translation and publication of his writings, opened up a new space for critiquing long-standing validations of "realism" as a political aesthetic. There was a new interest in film from the Soviet 1920s, and the writings of Dziga Vertov and the Russian Formalists. Combined, these and other factors shifted *Cahiers*' central concern to, "How does cinema work?" Attention moved from an aesthetic poetics to a politics of representation and communication.

The *Young Mr. Lincoln* essay appeared at a key moment of transition for *Cahiers* and a short time later, for English language film studies. A year earlier, following the tumultuous events of May-June 1968 in France, when a student and worker strike seemed to threaten the French State itself, *Cahiers* published a turning point essay, "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism," by leading editors Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni. It laid out a dramatic leftward political and aesthetic shift for the leading cinema journal of its time. The magazine definitively rejected the cinephilia on which it had been founded and run for the previous 18 years.[5] The editorial declared the publication's understanding of the political field of film, and it argued for priorities and lines of critique for the magazine's future. Then the magazine published specific case studies of representative films across a spectrum over several issues and about two years before shifting its orientation again to a "Marxist-Leninist" or "Maoist" direction, which concentrated on films from the People's Republic of China, on the one hand, and the vanguard period of Godard and Gorin's "Dziga Vertov Group" films, on the other. A further shift took place in following years, and the publication returned to a broader and less politicized survey as the key staff changed again.[6]





After getting his first law book, Lincoln is seen reading it by the river with his feet up, a pose repeated at key moments of the film.



Ann Rutledge observes Lincoln in this riverside communion with Law and Nature before appearing and calling out his name.

The “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” essay declared seven broad political categories of film, briefly sketching in an evaluation of each group. These seven could be clustered into three categories:

- “classic” films which followed the general dramatic narrative styles and conventions;
- explicitly political or militant films, clear in theme and intent;
- and modernist or self-reflexive art films which went beyond consecrated and commercial expectations and were open to political readings.

In the context of the times and the journal’s development, the short descriptions of each category were self-evident to anyone sympathetically following the *Cahiers* line, and the mention of a few titles provided sufficient contemporary examples.

Outside of France, particularly in the UK and North America, one category was especially intriguing for left film intellectuals. Most notoriously, the authors stressed the somewhat vague but tantalizing idea that some (conventional dramatic narrative, including mainstream Hollywood) films appeared to be conservative, but actually they opened up to a more politically radical statement through displaying contradictory elements or through the particular style of an auteur-director. Months later, the *Young Mr. Lincoln* essay provided *Cahiers*’ first detailed case study to demonstrate the abstract notion, and it was eagerly read as, at last, a concrete example of a new radical film criticism.

To make their case, Comolli and Narboni started from the explicitly stated premise that cinema operates totally subordinated to the dominant ideology:

“So, when we set out to make a film, from the very first shot, we are encumbered by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideology. This includes every stage in the process of production: subjects, ‘styles,’ forms, meanings, narrative traditions; all underline the general ideological discourse. The film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself. Once we realize that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the film-makers first task is to show up the cinema’s so-called ‘depiction of reality.’ If he can do so there is a chance that we will be able to disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function.”

## An aside on ideology

The concept of ideology in Marxism expresses a relation between forms of consciousness and human’s material existence “by referring to a distortion of thought which stems from, and conceals, social contradictions.”[7] One of the most central ideas of Marxism, the term has been defined and understood in different ways in the century and a half since the Communist Manifesto. It is often yoked to another key Marxist concept, contradiction.



Lincoln stands in the jail doorway, blocking the battering ram, and demanding, “Listen to me!” He starts in command mode. He then offers to take on any man present in physical battle.





After intimidating the biggest fellow present, Lincoln shifts his rhetorical tactic, imploring the group to, “Look at it from my side...” and humorously arguing that he is just a jackleg lawyer and their interest in seeing the Clay boys hung will surely come about after the trial.



When some in the crowd complain that they are all ready for a lynching, Abe shifts the argument again, making the much more abstract and foundational argument that if everyone took the law into their own hands, pretty soon no one would feel secure.



Finally, Lincoln closes the case by appealing to Scripture: “Blessed are the merciful...” The scene is remarkable in showing Lincoln’s extreme quick-thinking and skill in using his performance and words to turn around an angry mob. *Cahiers* reads this sequence, in a psychoanalytic take, as demonstrating Lincoln’s “castrating power.” But reading it as a

Ideology has had a particular urgency in Western Marxism because actual history defied the optimistic 19th century view of an inevitable progress to socialism beginning in the industrial countries. Originally, to many it seemed that capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction, and economic change would bring about political and cultural change. But rather than international proletarian solidarity, WW1 revealed nationalism dominant. Later, Nazi Germany showed large sections of the population enthusiastic for fascism. Actually, successful socialist revolution started with Russia, the most backward capitalist nation with a huge peasant class and a small working class. After WW2 China produced another example of the same phenomenon, and the wave of anti-colonial national liberation struggles in the 50s and 60s added to the drama.

Trying to account for the failure of a revolutionary working class to rise in the West, Marxists paid increasing attention to the nature of ideology that cemented people into supporting the status quo. An older and more simplistic view of ideology as simply “false ideas” that could be revealed and replaced with “correct” or “scientific” ones by dedicated revolutionary cadres explaining things, seemed increasingly naïve.

Part of the impetus came from new and richer theoretical understanding of Marxism. The publication in the late 1920s of *Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks* revealed the Bolshevik leader, exiled following the failure of the 1905 revolt, coming to a deeper and more nuanced concept of social and political change. In turn, Mao’s milestone essays written after the disastrous Long March contained remarkable passages such as saying that cultural changes in the superstructure could appear before fundamental changes in the economic base. Mao also spoke of organizing for change in fairly practical ways: “Where do correct ideas come from?” he asked, and answered “from social practice,” rather than from abstract theorizing. (A lesson subsequently lost on Western Maoists c. 1970, including *Cahiers*.)

A range of other left thinkers contributed to the stream of new ideas. A contemporary of Lenin, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s work became better known through translations. His key ideas indicate the bourgeois state not only has control by direct military and police force and the threat of it, but it also has ideological power through institutions such as education and religion. The state could fall back on direct coercion, but most of the time power is exerted through a hegemony of “what is” seemingly “normal.” Other thinkers, such as the Frankfurt School, paid intense attention to the growth and development of modern urban life and mass culture, both in the Central Europe of their origins and the United States of their exile from the Nazi regime.

The concept of contradiction as *Cahiers* used it in 1970 had come to the fore in several ways. Most obviously, the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser had used the concept along with “overdetermination” in discussing ideology. Earlier, Freud used “overdetermination” to stress the existence of multiple factors influencing any one observable phenomenon. Thus condensation and displacement shaped dreams; there was no simple 1:1 correlation of cause/effect because there were multiple causes each of which was modified in the process. This was also shaped within the increasing influence of psychoanalytic thought in France, especially that of Jacques Lacan.[8]

The *Cahiers* editors explicitly attributed their understanding of the concept of ideology to Louis Althusser who occupied a special place in the French left of the time. A member of the Communist Party, he brought a more sophisticated, philosophical, reading of Marx to a party that was dominated by trade union and parliamentary concerns and that blurred into a vague left humanism in cultural matters. Althusser was clearly influenced by both Mao and Gramsci, though he did not stress that. But he did emphasize ideology as a central factor of class control, and some of his followers, notably Pierre Macherey, revitalized Marxist consideration of literature by showing, for example, the sophistication of Lenin’s analysis of Tolstoi and stressing the literary production of meaning.

The quality of Althusser’s analysis was not challenged within *Cahiers* (or for that

performance, it could be argued that he is showing himself as a talented *politician*: able to change and redirect people’s thinking, to work effectively between the formal framework of governance and the immediate desires of the citizenry. In short, he is a master of the moment and executor of “the art of the possible.”

In other words, the film does repress “politics,” if by that we mean presentation of the large issues of public policy, but it does show Lincoln coming into his own as a consummate politician: someone with the skills and principles to gain democratic support for establishing his leadership. As many observers of the U.S. electoral system have said, Americans tend to vote for the person, not the platform. In *Cahiers’* view, the film has contradictions in trying to portray Lincoln as mythic and eternal. In this counter-reading, the film shows the process of a young man coming into his vocation as a leader.

matter by some of his followers abroad).[9] Left intellectuals coming to the question of ideology from other traditions, particularly German, Italian, and English Marxism, usually had a different perspective ranging from mild reserve/correction to significant revision to outright hostility. And further uneven developments cast the understanding of ideology and Althusser in different ways in various national cultures. While France was undergoing a surge of popular interest in psychoanalysis following the celebrity status of Lacan, in the UK Freudian thought was undergoing its first real introduction in intellectual circles. Meanwhile in the United States, where Freud’s ideas had been widely, popularly (and often simplistically) adopted for the previous 60 years, reception of “French Freud” was bound to be different (and often skeptical). Thus the local intellectual history and cultural terrain helped shape the new emphasis on ideology as part of cultural analysis. But figuring out how ideology worked and shaped individual and class-consciousness was high on the agenda for artists and intellectuals.

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After the trial, Lincoln walks down a courthouse hallway. An eager Mary Todd, who attended the trial with Douglas, comes forward to greet Abe, congratulate him and shake his hand. Douglas offers apologies for underestimating Lincoln, who in turn exchanges a sideways glance with Todd. The eyes tell the story.



In his last encounter with Mary Todd, Lincoln is commanded by an off-screen voice, "Hurry up,

## Symptomatic reading

For many readers, the most intriguing section of the "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism" essay concentrated on identifying "category e" films:

"films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner."

Repeatedly articulating metaphors of gaps, dislocations, cracks, fissures, corrosion, swerving, splitting, and transgressing, the editors present this group of films as having a surface that appears to be intact but that hides an underlying problem.

Thus the method of analysis called for is a symptomatic reading: just as a medical doctor gathers the apparent surface level of information but analyzes it for traces of a hidden, internal condition, the analysis of ideology in film expects to find a meaning below the immediately perceivable level.[10] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Crucially, the key to allowing this kind of reading of a film was that the works of art were assumed to have a "deeper level of imagery," which allows them to be self-critical, to disrupt the smooth surface of the dominant ideology.

At the time, *Cahiers* was being challenged on their left by a new publication, *Cinéthique*, which denied any political or aesthetic value to films that remained within the dominant forms.

"*Cinéthique* believed that cinema could break its ties with the dominant ideology only by situating itself elsewhere in a completely new field....For [*Cinéthique*]the ideological slant of a film depends on the way in which the reproduction of the world is approached (what matters is escaping the traps of specular vision: it is necessary, therefore, to break the illusion of reality and to display what is really at stake, in terms of work and materials)."[11]

Looking back on this moment, Comolli says,

"[*Cinéthique*] distinguished themselves by radically rejecting practically the entire cinema. Personally, I have always been concerned with saving the cinema, including the most ideological films. The idea behind 'Young Mr Lincoln' was to save Hollywood."[12]

A cynical reading of this *Cahiers* maneuver could point out that the self-critical "category e" claim allowed *Cahiers* to hold firmly to their previous bulwark position of auteur criticism, especially in terms of their own previously established pantheon of directors. Those filmmakers earlier heralded as genius artists, particularly those working in commercial entertainment cinema, and especially Hollywood, could still be validated: this time on political grounds.[13]

More sympathetically, one might see *Cahiers* as here caught in a moment

Abe! The crowd's waitin'!" The pair share a significant exchange of glances and smiles (hers quite large, shielded by her bonnet from Stephen Douglas seeing it). *Cahiers* views her as repressing her desire; this counterpoint sees her as actively expressing her agency within the limits of the time's class and gender restrictions.



As the prosecutor makes his opening statement, heavy on grand gestures and rhetorical ornamentation, Abe finds a book and stretches casually, theatrically upstaging the state's attorney. Given the formal setting of a frontier courtroom, the gesture makes clear Lincoln's calculation of "naturalness."

of transition, and you could note that intellectuals seldom make a complete 180 degree break from the past. Being so heavily invested in a certain canon, and one which they had spent so much energy on building, they couldn't just discard the past. "Category e" provided a safe haven or a transit point while moving further left. In the abstract, as Marxists trying to do an ideological analysis of cinema, they had moved beyond a naïve auteurism that simply saw the genius artist-director as the origin of a film as a work of art (the auteur position evidenced for example in Andrew Sarris's 1968 landmark *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1928-1968*). But the fact that they actually had studied John Ford (and many others) as just such an author meant that they could still call on "Ford" as a coherent set of artistic tropes in their own subsequent analyses, including *YML*.

Three "category e" directors are mentioned specifically in "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism": Ford, Dryer, Rossellini. Comolli and Narboni explain that they will not denounce these films for their limits, nor claim the films break from ideology itself, but they will show the "process in action," how these films "criticize themselves." The ideology

"...is presented by the film. This is the case in many Hollywood films for example, which while being completely integrated in the system and the ideology end up by partially dismantling the system from within. We must find out what makes it possible for a film-maker to corrode the ideology by restating it in the terms of his film..."

The *Young Mr. Lincoln* analysis became the first working out of this commitment. The essay takes three major approaches to the film. First, it sets out the major theoretical and methodological issues that pertain to the detailed case study. (I'll return to discuss that section below, after surveying the other two.) Second, briefly it tries to place the film in its own historical moment, in 1939, as a project of the studio and its head, Darryl F. Zanuck, to create a propaganda piece for the Republican Party in the upcoming 1940 Presidential race. Third, it involves a very close reading of the film to reveal its narrative and cinematic contradictions.

## *Young Mr. Lincoln* and historical determination

The first concern, setting out the historical determinants of the film, explains the movie in terms of the upcoming 1940 Presidential electoral contest pitting the incumbent Democrat, Franklin Roosevelt, against a (at the time, yet to be determined) Republican.

*Cahiers* offers the stated goal of *YML* thus:

### "6. IDEOLOGICAL UNDERTAKING

What is the subject of *Young Mr. Lincoln*? Ostensibly and textually it is 'Lincoln's youth' (on the classical cultural model —'Apprenticeship and Travels'). In fact—through the expedient of a simple chronicle of events presented (through the presence and actualization effect specific to classic cinema) as if they were taking place for the first time, it is the *reformulation* of the historical figure of Lincoln on the level of the myth and eternal." [emphasis in original]

Why was this film with this reformulation made? The *Cahiers* writers explain that "American Big Business goes to war against the New Deal."



In the Independence Day parade, among the few blacks in the film, two younger African American men carry the banner for the Veterans of the War of 1812, who served twenty years earlier. During the war, typically Illinois soldiers were involved in skirmishes with Northwest Territory Indian nations that were supported and supplied by the British from Canada.





At the dance, a doorman carrying Lincoln's stovepipe hat is one of the few African Americans seen in the film.



Lincoln comes to Ann's grave, bringing early spring crocus flowers. The river is breaking up and Abe asks his departed love if he should stay in New Salem or go to Springfield to be a lawyer. He lets a stick fall to choose the way, and it falls toward the headstone, toward Springfield, toward the law. Decision made, he remarks he might have pushed the stick in that direction.



“All this allows us to assume that in 1938-39, Fox, managed by the (also) Republican Zanuck, participated in its own way in the Republican offensive by producing a film on the legendary character Lincoln. Of all the Republican Presidents, he is not only the most famous, but on the whole the only one capable of attracting mass support, because of his humble origins, his simplicity, his righteousness, his historical role, and the legendary aspects of his career and his death.”

They remark that it was not “fortuitous”... “that during the preceding season, the Democrat Sherwood’s play ‘Abe Lincoln in Illinois’ had been a great success on Broadway.” Thus anticipating a film version of the stage hit, “to reverse the impact of the play and of Lincoln’s myth in favor of the Republicans,...” Zanuck rushed *YML* into production.

We can stand back a moment here and ask a few questions.

1. How reasonable is this assumption?
2. Is there any evidence to support the assumption?

Certainly, *Cahiers* is smart in seeing the film’s end point as being the mythic, eternal Lincoln (represented by the marble statue in the Lincoln Memorial). And certainly the Ford film does erase Lincoln as a politician. Logically, a film validating the most famous Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, would serve the general conservative and pro-business interests in the contest.[14] But many readers saw this part of the analysis as shallow and flawed.[15] The most obvious problem was that *Cahiers* attributed the instigating motivation to one man, producer Darryl Zanuck, who was undeniably a powerful force but who still operated within the studio system, itself constrained by financial interests. It is often forgotten by many (though not *Cahiers* in their remarks) that while “Hollywood” was the visible location of the cinema industry, that an equally important part, the financial section, was located in New York banking circles which clearly had ultimate control over decisions.[16] But above all, *Cahiers* offers no “smoking gun” evidence to back up their claim of Zanuck’s and the studio’s goal. They reference no memo, report of a meeting or conversation, memoir, etc. to support their supposition. The claim rests on shaky ground. *Cahiers* presumes that knowing class interests and party affiliation allows them to decisively determine intention for both the studio as a corporation and Zanuck as its leader.[17]

Of course, claiming to know intention on the basis of affiliation is the meat and potatoes of partisan political discourse. It endlessly reappears in diverse examples across the entire spectrum of politicians and pundits, from far right to far left. The Tea Party person “knows” what Barack Obama is trying to do, just because Obama is Obama: liar, Socialist, Muslim, Kenyan, etc..[18] So we shouldn’t be surprised to see this trope appearing in politicized film theory. But it’s worth noticing that the exact same determination of intent (and effect) on the basis of party affiliation or political sympathy directed the far right crusade against “subversive” elements in Hollywood in the HUAC era and more broadly in Senator McCarthy’s attacks on government employees.

Further, *Cahiers* offered no explanation of how or why Zanuck would make an expensive production decision based on political party preference rather than likely financial return. (In fact the film did adequately at the box office, but was not a big hit.) This is especially dubious if you consider that a few months later Zanuck chose to produce *The Grapes of Wrath*, arguably the most politically progressive studio film of the pre-WW2 era, with Ford directing. If the producer were driving a Republican Party agenda, why would he produce such a socially and politically left-leaning



While visiting the Clay cabin, when Lincoln asks for a piece of paper on which to make some notes, Sara brings him the fateful *Farmer's Almanac*.



The second day of the trial begins with Lincoln asking Cass to be recalled. Smirking, Cass is seen surrounded by his friends, smoking a cigar and taking a big swig from the whiskey jug before going to the witness chair.



Lincoln asks Cass to retell his previous day's eyewitness testimony, including that he was able to see the crime because of the full moon. Cass affirms that again, and he blows a big smoke ring at the conclusion of his statement.

film?[19]

But looking at the *Cahiers* remarks on history today, what we can see is an undeniably limited but interestingly ambitious attempt at a political economy analysis of Hollywood in the late 1930s. In a sense *Cahiers*' instincts were right, but their data pool was limited. Today we have a much richer basis for considering these matters with works such as Tino Balio's masterful history, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. And more specific studies allow a better understanding of points *Cahiers* raise. The French editors note that Hollywood faced drastically declining box office in the middle of the Depression. Catherine Jurca's recent book *Hollywood 1938: Motion Picture's Greatest Year* studies both the dilemma and the favored response (a massive PR campaign to promote film-going). Jurca shows consumer resistance to the dominant mid-1930s film product and the call by reviewers for more serious film.

Certainly Zanuck's decision to make *Young Mr. Lincoln* (shot in March-April 1939 and released in June, 16 months before the 1940 Presidential election) meshed with the idea of producing more notable works. In addition, Robert Sherwood's new play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, was a Broadway hit in 1938, won a Pulitzer Prize, and was going to be a film. Writer Carl Sandberg's biography, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (1939) was about to appear, which revived interest in Sandberg's earlier best-selling classic, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (1926). Closer study of Zanuck also suggests more motives than just obtaining a propaganda edge for the 1940 election. In *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*, George F. Custen points out that Zanuck made his mark early on at Warner Brothers by perfecting the hooks of sex and violence in popular films that especially appealed to urban audiences. Ford's Lincoln biopic moves in a different direction because 90% of Fox's theaters were in the Far West United States populated largely by migrants from the small town and rural Midwest. *YML* perfectly matched this demographic which, not incidentally, was the Nebraska-born executive's (b. 1902 in Wahoo, Nebraska). In an era of vertical integration (studios directly owned many theaters that exhibited their films), Zanuck's highest priority was not only to be commercially successful, but to be successful above all in the Fox theaters. Depicting Lincoln as a Midwest-grounded young lawyer properly pitched the great man.

Doubtless more could be unraveled about the institutional production situation.[20] And the critiques of *Cahiers* as over-simplistic are correct. But the impulse moved in the right direction: economics and institutional conditions shaped *YML*, like all Hollywood films, and they created the base line for individual decisions, be those of producer Zanuck or screenwriter Trotti or director Ford.[21] An adequate accounting has to include multiple determinations that both cancel and reinforce the film's "meaning." And in a much broader and more expansive sense, the historical framework of the film's production would have to account for the economic situation in 1939 (a developing recovery accentuated by the prospect of increasing war preparations), the international situation with imperialist expansion by Japan, Germany, and Italy; and U.S. cultural shifts resulting from labor migration, especially from South to North, Midwest to West, rural to urban.

*Cahiers* is somewhat deceptive. On the one hand they argue that the film is not a direct, transparent, or literal transformation of its social and historical context. But on the other hand, that starting point must still be considered and is significant. And they weigh the (suspected, not openly known) intentions of one person, Zanuck, as the instigating force. What





As Cass is excused and begins to leave, like a stage magician, Lincoln takes the almanac out of his stovepipe hat. Abe begins a further interrogation with the accusation that Cass must have killed Scrub White because the quarter moon had set at the time of the murder as proven by the almanac tables.



During the tar barrel bonfire, in a clearing Matt Clay and Scrub White fight in a fairly distant longshot in dark shadows. The obscure action heightens when Adam Clay sees the knocked-down White pull a gun. The medium shot reveals the start of the action, but the cutting and framing returns to obscuring the action as the brothers pile on the gunman. Abigail Clay arrives on the scene. We hear a shot, but only see her face, not what happened.

they want to show then is that the initial impulse gets transformed in the actual work of producing the film: the film has a “complex, mediated and decentered relationship with the context.” That is demonstrated in the scene-by-scene analysis.

## Cahiers reading ideology

The main body of the *YML* essay concentrates on a close, detailed reading of the film in terms of ideology. For *Cahiers* such a reading is not an “interpretation,” which finds a universal essence at the heart of an artistic work, nor is it a mechanical deconstruction laying out all the parts (in the manner of the common French rhetorical explication de texte). The remarkable and innovative thrust of the analytic method is its emphasis on contradictions the film’s process.

Therefore, the *Cahiers* editors begin their specific discussion of the film framing it within the problem of Lincoln as a character. In this case he’s not simply a myth or symbol, but a protagonist, who must be distorted to fit the filmmaking. Although the film on the surface seems to be about Lincoln’s youth, its goal is to elevate the historical figure to “the level of myth and the eternal.” We can remember that the film’s last image is of the Lincoln Memorial statue: Lincoln frozen in stone for the ages. To get to that point, the film tries to tell a smooth linear foreshadowing story, but, *Cahiers* warns, contradictions arise.

What follows in their analytic essay is a scene-by-scene breakdown that repeatedly emphasizes the gap between the most apparent level of narration and deeper, more contradictory, aspects of the unfolding film. In particular these are revealed by “structuring absences,” things that are repressed by the film: particularly politics and sexuality. The idea of a structuring absence—something that signifies although it is not present—is probably the most influential part of the *Cahiers* approach. The concept opens up analysis to not just mimicking or mirroring what a film says overtly, but to looking for that which it cannot address.[22]

The other major innovation in *Cahiers*’ working method is its absolute reliance on what they call “active reading.” By this they mean they will proceed not by referring to the film as a memorial experience (where the “meaning” can be summed up in a synchronic whole) or offering an interpretation or explanation of the “meaning.” Rather they want to treat the film as a dynamic process in which the film’s ideology unfolds with a scene-by-scene progression. Their aim was not to present the film as an organic whole for aesthetic appreciation, but to determine the mechanisms by which it conveys ideology.

I will not go through reading the *Cahiers* essay in great detail, since it deserves to be studied closely and in its entirety, and with the film at hand. [23] But the editors mark out three different key parts of the film which they argue cannot be smoothly integrated: the hero’s destiny, the fictional narration, and the Fordian écriture (writing). From here through the section “Foreshadowing Cass’ guilt,” I will look at some representative examples of *Cahiers*’ active reading and counterbalance it with my own active reading.

## Destiny

First, the film’s generic aspect: as *Cahiers* puts it, “the early life of the great man.” They only briefly mention it. But we could look at it more broadly. Of course, this is a familiar narrative pattern, one that appears in many

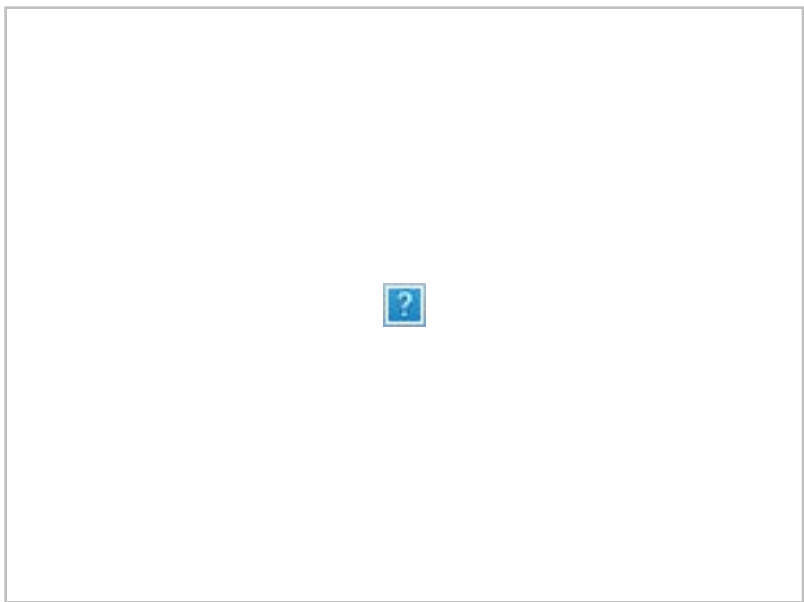




Cass arrives after the shot is fired, and bends over White's body. The scene is lit to show only the most minimal information of who is present, not what is happening. The audience can easily assume that White was killed with his own gun.



Cass rises from his buddy's body, holding Matt's knife, and announcing White is dead, stabbed.



Townpeople arrive carrying torches and gather around the fallen body (left) while the family groups together (right). Lincoln is present as an observer of the scene dead center, obscure in the dark, but marked by his dress and hat.

fictional forms as seen in folklore, stories of heroes, children's books, and so forth. In heroic tales, destiny is often foretold in a prophecy, even before birth. Or in legend, youthful years involve disciplined training under a powerful mentor. In the Romantic Movement, the narrative line appeared as the novel of apprenticeship, or the confessions of the young man. The story of youth also provides a common narrative form for biography, with the historian uncovering details from early in life that seem important in terms of later achievements. This common trope in fiction allows for material and psychological conflicts, overcoming hardship, making a big discovery, and other kinds of character development. While masculine stories usually stress drama leading to action, female versions are familiar as romantic comedies with the young heroine negotiating misunderstandings and social constraints to achieve maturity. Or, as melodrama, she's presented in a narrative of female suffering.

The key point that *Cahiers* wants to make here is that in this case, since the film depicts a famous historical figure, the end is already known. And, since they argue the film's "ideological project [is to present] (Lincoln, a mythical hero representing Law and guarantor of Truth)," he is beyond politics or sexuality (both of which they consider repressed in the film)

There is only one moment in the film showing Lincoln as a politician: at the start with him in New Salem, Illinois, running for office and being introduced by a pompous orator on the front porch of Abe's country store. From a relaxed position in everyday dress, Lincoln stands, remarks that everyone present already knows him, then informally, plainly, and very briefly lays out his position. Although Lincoln's historical achievement was political—pursuing and ending the Civil War; ending slavery with a Constitutional amendment (both profoundly political in execution as shown in Spielberg's film)—there is only a trace reference to politics here.

*Cahiers* doesn't really discuss slavery and blacks in the film. And within the film itself, the issue of slavery and the situation of African Americans is also effectively repressed.[24] Blacks appear only a few times in the film and at a glance: two younger men carry the banner for veterans from the War of 1812 in the Independence Day parade, and a liveried driver walks the horses pulling the carriage for the parade's Columbia.[25] And there are the doorman and punchbowl servers at the dance. Talking with the Clay family late in the film (three women), Lincoln mentions slaves arriving in his birth-state of Kentucky and undercutting the economic situation of white workers, forcing his family to leave for Indiana, a Free state. Narratively, this supplies a background element remarkably late. Its presence is part of Lincoln making a connection, a parallel, to this, his surrogate family, who at the start of the film were themselves travelling West to homestead. The fact that it is told so late indicates that it really isn't needed for backstory.[26]

For *Cahiers*, the founding intention of *YML*, "the reformulation of the historical figure of Lincoln on the level of the myth and the eternal," is accomplished significantly through staging a "feigned indecisiveness." Lincoln repeatedly faces situations where he has to choose between opposites, but he doesn't. The moment or decision is elided, or the solution appears, as if by predestination, a magic answer built into the universe. The first scene, a scrolling poem recounting the questions Lincoln's deceased mother would have about what became of her son, frames all that follows as an exposition that answers the questions. But the audience already knows what happens to Abe Lincoln. Thus the poem acts to naturalize what follows, to present the depicted events as destiny.

Lincoln is less an active agent than simply a vehicle for moral truth.





At the murder site, the sheriff asks if anyone saw the crime. Abigail Clay says she did, but when asked which of her boys did it, she replies, “I ain’t sayin’!” This begins her steadfast refusal to choose between the two.

*Cahiers* marks various events as leading up to the dramatic trial: Lincoln receives Blackstone’s law book without seeking it; he lets fortune decide if he should stay in Salem or go to Springfield to practice law; he resolves a dispute between two farmers without deciding between them; as a judge in a pie contest, he alternates bites without choosing. And most significantly, in the second half of the film, he defends two men who are both charged with murder without deciding between them. He determines the real culprit by an unanticipated fortunate act. Needing paper to make some notes when interviewing the men’s mother, the family gives him an almanac that turns out to have the explanation of the murder, just as the same family gave him his first law book. And at a key moment in the trial, he pulls the almanac out of his tall hat, just like a magician.

Lincoln as predestined, as restorer of order, is the propaganda goal of the producer, *Cahiers* argues. But, they then argue this intention is upset by two other aspects of the work: the work of turning the story into a dramatic narrative and the “Fordian code” of the director’s signature style.

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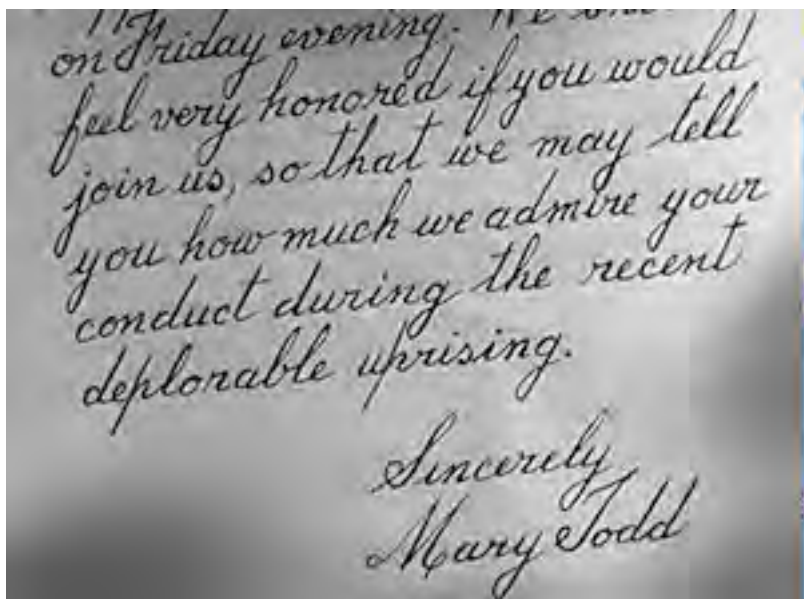
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The Cinema Sins episodes on YouTube result from a close analysis of “errors” in a film illustrated with clips and directed by a voice-over critique along with subtitles. The investigation counts up continuity errors, unexplained or implausible plot developments, and other logical lapses. The creator explains that all films have such “problems” and he’s *not* deciding on the worth of a film. In this example from *Django Unchained*, a missing plot point is underlined. In a later example, the narrator points out Django is shown to be “a natural” at shooting with a pistol when he first gets one. But in a later scene he is showing strenuously practicing his skill. Why would “a natural” need to rehearse?



After Lincoln disperses the lynch mob, he receives an invitation to a dance from Mary Todd, a new arrival to Springfield’s upper class society.

## The fictional code

*Cahiers* argues that certain narrative necessities, managed by John Ford, work to undermine the producer’s goal of making the man into a myth. One of those is the entire shooting and editing of the murder scene. While we “see” all the events step by step, the sequence is shot and edited so as to be undecipherable. We viewers (and the two accused men and their mother who arrives on the scene) are misled by certain gestures (e.g., the gunshot) and selective information (a clear view of the murderous stabbing being blocked). In turn, not being present, Lincoln has incomplete information and is misled along with the townspeople. While this creates narrative suspense (who did it?), as the Clay boys’ lawyer he tries to find out from their mother which one is guilty. But, she refuses to choose between them. (Also, she is deceived and actually doesn’t know.) Lincoln has to ask her, but also to accept her refusal. “I can’t! I just can’t!”

As a result, Lincoln has a contradictory position, according to *Cahiers*. He is a bringer of truth (what really happened at the murder scene) but not through detective-like investigation and deduction. Rather, he simply receives the definitive truth from the Clays giving him the Farmer’s Almanac as notepaper. His means are magical rather than scientific. He proves Cass couldn’t have seen what he claims to have witnessed by dramatically presenting the almanac to show it was too dark to see. He is a conduit for the truth: Nature—permanent and eternal—is the irrefutable authority.

But to some extent almost every film, and certainly almost all studio-produced examples of Classic Hollywood Cinema have some elements which can be read as contradictions to the dominant aesthetic or ideological project. Most simply these are continuity errors, the “goofs” that film enthusiasts love to note, especially on sites such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com). And there, and on other film fan sites, there are often comment and query message boards that are animated when someone writes in pointing out a “mistake” or asking a question about something confusing or something that appears impossible or implausible. And of course there are films that are generally seen as narratively confused (famously, Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep*, 1946).

Today, with the ability to make clips of specific scenes, this kind of filmic interrogation can be taken to a high art: I suggest looking at some of the Cinema Sins series on YouTube. You might want to start with *Django Unchained*: “[Everything Wrong With Django Unchained In 4 Minutes Or Less](#)”. The point is, that despite these disruptive contradictions, people still watch films and assemble a whole (most of the time) out of the inconsistencies. Strong arguments can be made that even the most poorly made films still “work”—a fact that brings out a whole new level of understanding moving image art.[27] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

## The Fordian code

One of the more elusive aspects of the *Cahiers* analysis is their claim that there is a Fordian *écriture*, (literally writing, but more fully authorial style, or working mode) which also creates a disruption in the text’s ideological project. This idea is elusive because it depends on something outside of the film proper: the ensemble knowledge of the director’s other films, that is, knowledge of him as an auteur. For example, in many Ford films a dance or other collective celebration brings people together and underlines a basic societal harmony. And there is a significant dance in *YML*. Following the thwarted lynching, Lincoln is invited to a fancy dress ball at





At the dance, Mary Todd leaves Steven Douglas and goes to Lincoln to insist he dance with her, he avers that he doesn't know how, but she simply demands that he dance with her. After they dance she reprimands him, touching him with her fan, and saying he should take her outside. Throughout, she commands his attention and actions.



At the July 4th parade one of the film's few black people leads the horses pulling the carriage of Columbia, an eager young woman dressed as the iconic symbol of the USA. Following her are several Native Americans on horseback.

the home of a leading citizen by Mary Todd.[28] Obviously those present represent the business, government, landowners of Springfield, and the professionals (like Lincoln and Douglas) who serve them, and the servants who attend them. *Cahiers*, stressing the distortion of harmony, reads the sequence as revealing Lincoln as the awkward figure in the dance. He is passable but obviously unskilled in the first dance and moves in reverse to the swirling procession in the second one. True enough, but taking Dance=Harmony as Ford's auteur trope (on the basis of knowing other Ford films) and Lincoln's awkwardness as disruptive may be over-reading. The scene can also be understood as a distinct class contrast to the earlier, rowdy Independence Day festivities that do show the Springfield community's full class range in boisterous celebration. In contrast, in this upper class social setting, Lincoln is amiable but self-deprecating, present but not integral with the group.

*Cahiers'* argument that Ford undermines the film's studio-intended ideological project begins with the two quotes that start their essay. One, by Engels and Marx about a year after the first Inauguration, remarks that Lincoln became President not by leading a popular revolution, but by electoral process. (And for many contemporary readers, it's worth pointing out that Lincoln entered office with one of the lowest pluralities in Presidential history.)[29] Thus Lincoln's becoming President was not Destiny but Politics; true history had to be suppressed to present the mythic hero. The second is an anecdote about Ford, remembering a discarded shot of Lincoln entering Springfield on a mule, calling the fresh lawyer "a poor ape." By repeating the comment, *Cahiers* points out Ford's own view undermined the intended sanctification. Their extended scene-by-scene analysis continues by emphasizing the diverse ways a Fordian code or system creates contradictions for the "reformulation" process.

*Cahiers'* way of looking at the film around structuring absences depends on a prior knowledge of the conventions of cinema, in general, such as how it typically shows the passage of time and spatial relationships; the standards of Hollywood cinema, such as the star system and narrative tropes; and the way a particular auteur, in this case Ford, works for expressive purposes within the system. An example is the first part of the Night scene. The preceding scene at the trial ended sensationally with Cass giving a second testimony, saying he saw Matt kill Scrub White. But Lincoln, following the family's wishes, is committed to not choosing between them but rather freeing both of them.

That night, the mood is somber. *Cahiers* points to it as a Hollywood dramaturgical convention: the calm before the storm. Such a scene allows for a "rest" before the big finale, the action sequence, or emotional eruption. In terms of dramatic writing, it is almost an obligatory scene. By slowing down the pace and allowing for some reflection, the seriousness of the situation sinks in and thus opens up space for an even more heightened explosive dramatic action to follow. (Typical scenes would be the police or soldiers preparing for the scheduled action, or the protagonist mulling over some new information or revelation before their partner/spouse/lover returns and it has to be discussed.)

The family sings together (actually humming) and then the mother, fiancé, and daughter-in-law depart. *Cahiers* points out that there is a missing scene, part of the repression of the narration to maintain the enigma. Given the new eyewitness revelation at the trial, pointing to Matt as guilty, we would logically expect a discussion of this. But there is none. Not between the brothers, not with the other family members, not with their lawyer. It doesn't happen. It's one of those missing things, as *Cahiers* themselves indicate, that becomes clearer on a second or repeated viewing.

Similarly, once we know from viewing the entire film that the proof the brothers are innocent is in the Almanac; every time the booklet appears, it is significantly revealing. Especially in the vigil: Lincoln holds it up while talking with the judge. The older man recommends Lincoln get advice from another lawyer, Douglas, and have one of the two men plead guilty, thus saving the other one. Lincoln defers, but with the Almanac in hand, so on a second viewing, we know he already has plotted what he will do at trial. *Cahiers* argues that these narrative effects, revealed by





At the parade Abe begins by standing with some ordinary townsmen. He will move on to the reviewing stand and meet Mary Todd.



After the first day of the brothers' trial for murder, the family gathers in the jail, singing quietly. The mood is very somber; Cass's eyewitness testimony seems to have sealed their fate.

their “active reading” are artifacts of the need to link Lincoln with the dramatic and miraculous revealing of Truth. Lincoln as Revealer fits the producer’s goal: “the reformulation of Lincoln on the level of the myth and the eternal”

The film exhibits several features of the film that *Cahiers* doesn’t mention but which could bolster their case. One is that the entire narrative progress avoids some of the most common tropes of the apprenticeship story: learning from mistakes. Usually the protagonist suffers several reversals or defeats before the final victory. These are portrayed as foundational experiences that test the hero’s commitment and often teach a valuable lesson. We never see that in *YML*. In the same vein, while we see Lincoln talk, it is mostly in delivering a statement rather than in the give-and-take of a genuine conversation (the scene with Ann Rutledge is the exception). Thus he does seem to be simply a vehicle for the Truth.

*Cahiers’* reading is certainly *possible*. But it is not the only one available. One could read the nighttime events as an example of Abe’s extremely clever reading of a situation. Lincoln doesn’t know he will succeed, but he does know that if he can force Cass to confess, he will exonerate both of the Clays. He is calculating, just as one-by-one he picked off the key figures in the lynch mob: suspecting that Buck, once challenged to a physical fight, would back down; and that another was religious and would stop if reminded of that; and that his basic stock of community good will would let him make a comic plea to let him defend these, his first clients, in open court. In this perspective, Lincoln is far less a figure of “myth and the eternal” and far more the honest man of the people, the unpretentious and plainspoken frontiersman. As Peter Wollen notes of the film’s core political values:

“Distrust of the aristocracy is paralleled by distrust of the urban masses: the movie’s populism is based on the independent rural yeomanry of homesteaders. It is a classical petit-bourgeois populism.”[30]

As *Cahiers* notes, Lincoln can be easily read as taking a position within the Clay family. It is clear from the scene with his visit to the family’s farm that by metonymy he is joined to them. He grew up in a cabin much like their log cabin, his deceased mother was like Mrs. Clay, he had a sister named Sarah who died, his family too had to move westward seeking opportunity, they cook his favorite dish, and so forth.

In summary, *Cahiers* argues that the film’s “ideological project” (validating a Lincoln myth to serve an electoral aim) is contradicted in at least five ways:

1. There are significant distortions such as deception by shot and editing in the murder scene.
2. There are omissions such as scenes that would be needed for the crime thriller genre but which would have lessened the presentation of Lincoln’s omnipotence: for example, he never confronts the accused about what happened, what they know.
3. The film relies on exaggerated accentuation as seen in the very heightened drama of the final scenes at the trial and the aftermath.
4. There is a scriptural violence, invoking God, and Law, Truth, and Family in a distorted way.
5. The film’s project aims at a religious (Puritan) sense of election, that Lincoln’s place is predetermined, but it must maintain suspense and a presentation of free choice in order to maintain basic narrative interest.





After the first day at trial Lincoln sits in his second floor office with his feet out the window and playing "Dixie" on a Jew's Harp.



On the street below, hearing Lincoln, Stephen Douglas stops his carriage and with his companion, Mary Todd looks up at Abe.



Lincoln stops playing and looks down.



Mary Todd asks Douglas to continue discussing his political ambitions, a remark that seems directed at Lincoln witnessing her presence with his rival. Douglas signals his driver to start up and turns his head.



But Todd keeps looking up at Lincoln, hinting at what her real interest is. The tighter reverse shot marks Abe's observant interest in Mary Todd.

## Besides destiny (an aside)

There are some elements of the Lincoln myth that *Cahiers* doesn't touch on. In the United States, schoolchildren learn some stories about Lincoln and this forms the commonplace knowledge the filmmakers can expect the audience already has. One is the Honest Abe story, which recounts how, at the end of the day, discovering he had overcharged a woman customer in his country store, he walked many miles to return a few cents. The woman is always described as a widow or poor or both, and the moral lesson is that honesty should honor the most humble and vulnerable people and that personal sacrifice (the long walk) is a good thing. Another (often illustrated with a picture) shows him reading at night by the fireplace (the family too poor to afford candles or lanterns for this purpose), in his thirst for knowledge and self-education. Both common knowledge stories would provide a backdrop for the *YML* scenes of Abe receiving the law book, reading it on his own in nature, and choosing to walk on, alone, at the end of the film.



Continuing the vigil, the trial judge comes to Lincoln and recommends the young lawyer get help from a more experienced one, such as Douglas. Further, the judge says that if Lincoln would identify the killer at trial, he would be lenient on the other brother. Lincoln turns down both offers, while holding the Farmer's Almanac. The judge says things will go badly, "as sure as the moon sets."

*Cahiers* makes only the faintest gestures to recognizing Lincoln's sly cleverness framed within a folksy stance of unassuming modesty. His election speech, plain and simple, is delivered in a way to lightly separate himself from the rhetorically inflated introduction that preceded his address. (This prefigures the concise simple economy of his most famous speech, the Gettysburg Address.) Dealing with the overheated dispute between two farmers, he settles it by pointing out the damages sought by one are just about equal to those claimed by the other, and that he would cancel them and pocket the difference as his legal fee.

The decisive moment for a counter-claim against the *Cahiers*' assumptions could be the lynching scene. As the Clay brothers are taken to jail, the hangers-on at the crime scene become agitated and call out for instant justice in the form of a hanging. Lincoln's friend Efe warns him of the plan and says Abe needs to do something. Abe approaches the family, telling them to hurry to the jail. Mrs. Clay cries out, "Who are you?" and Lincoln answers, "I'm your lawyer, m'am!" This moment can be read as a turning point in his self awareness for he is next seen pushing his way through the crowd at the jail, standing in front of the door that's being battered, and stopping the crowd. His action is clear and calculated: he demands they stop and physically stands in the way. He challenges any man present to take him on physically and when Buck does, intimidates the fellow into backing down. He then shifts to his folksy wit and appeals to them that he needs the clients, and that as a jackleg lawyer, he won't be effective. Finally he singles out a God-fearing man in the crowd and shames him into leaving by quoting Scripture. It is a remarkable performance, and it reveals what had been hinted at earlier. Lincoln is extremely self-aware, and has inner resources to command a situation when needed. His folksy banter is deployed to achieve his calculated aims. This type of sly wit is also seen in the title character of Ford's earlier film, *Judge Priest* (1934) played by humorist Will Rogers.[31]



After the sheriff takes the Clay boys off to jail, the drunken male crowd, in a mood for continuing their collective celebration decides to lynch Matt and Adam. As they run off to do so, the women of the Clay family are bewildered. Lincoln steps forward, telling them, We gotta hurry," but Mrs. Clay, confused, says, "Who are you?" Abe replies with direct assuredness, "I'm your lawyer, M'am." Coming at 33 min in the 100 min film, the declaration stands as the perfect conclusion to the first act of a three act drama.



Lincoln finds his true vocation, his identity, his mission. He enters the second act storming through the crowd outside the jail to stop the lynching by putting his body in the doorway. With a lynching mob trying to break the jailhouse door, Lincoln, who has just told Mrs. Clay he'll be her boys lawyer, forcefully pushes his way through the angry crowd. This is the first evidence of his action, determination, and power.





In the jury selection Lincoln strikes a deliberately casual pose with his legs stretched out while using his folksy address to judge the suitability of a young man. Lincoln continually plays casual against the prosecutor's rather pompous formality and inflated rhetoric. During jury selection, when the prosecutor objects to Lincoln asking if a prospective juror knows the prosecutor ...



... Lincoln turns it around by remarking that he's worried that the citizen might *not* know the prosecutor (implying to know him is to have a low opinion of him). The courtroom crowd bursts into laughter, particularly Mary Todd, sitting in a front row. Even Stephen Douglas is amused at Abe's ready wit.

Some healthy skepticism about *Cahiers'* assertion about the film's controlling "ideological project" might make us look at the conclusion in a different way. If we instead assume that the project of the film is to please the core 20th Century-Fox theatrical audience, those transplanted Midwesterners now living in the West, we could read Lincoln for most of the film embodying their core values in a film that recapitulates the sentimental populism of small town and rural life. Like Will Rogers' performance persona, Fonda and Ford's version of young Abe rests on deflating pretension in many cases, and coming to defense of the defenseless when needed through strong moral assertion that combines with appeals to deeper sensibilities and values. His defense of Mrs. Clay's refusal to testify under the badgering prosecution is the supreme moment in this pattern.

"I may not know so much of law, Mr. Felder, but I know what's right and what's wrong and I know what you're asking is wrong. Put yourself in this woman's place, your honor. Can you truthfully say you'd do differently? Look at her. She's just a simple ordinary country woman. She can't even write her own name. Yet has she no feelings? No heart? I've seen Abigail Clay exactly three times in my life, gentlemen, and yet I know everything there is to know about her.

I know her because I've seen hundreds of women just like her working in the fields—kitchen hovering over some sick and helpless child. Women who say little, but do much. Who ask for nothing and give all. And I tell you that such a woman will never answer the question that's been put to her here. Never!"[32]

According to Margaret Thorpe's study of Hollywood film, *America at the Movies* (1939), "The audience was primarily middle-class whites between the ages of fourteen and forty-five, the most important segment of which was adult female—the 'average citizen's wife' who set the tone for the majority of American movies." [33] Obviously Lincoln's declaration goes directly to the values and attitudes of that demographic.

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Following the Independence Day Parade, there is a pie judging contest. Newly arrived bachelor Abe Lincoln is the judge with a large female audience.



Abe explains the apple slice is very good, but then he's tempted by the peach one, and vice versa, thus having to eat more and more to make up his mind.



## What every woman knows

For all of its rigorousness, close attention to detail, and earnest concern for ideology, the *Cahiers YML* discussion has its own “structuring absences,” and some of these have to do with matters that “every woman knows.” In other words, there are matters of style, presentation, and narration present in the film text that would be understood by most women viewers (and a fair number of men) but about which the *Cahiers* editors seem clueless.

A good example is the pie-eating scene. As part of the series of July 4th festivities, Abe is shown as the judge in a common fairground domestic competition and celebration. He is seen with two large slices of pie, one in each hand. First he tastes one, judges it very good, and then the other, same thing, so back to the first. *Cahiers'* discussion of the Celebration events covers the different episodes, pointing to how each reveals a different aspect of Lincoln: solemnity with the veteran's parade, physical strength in the rail-splitting context, and cunning in the tug-of-war by tying his end of the rope to a horse-drawn wagon.

“Finally, more subtly, faced with the undecidable character of a situation (the ethic, or gastronomic, impossibility of preferring the product of one cook to that of another) the fiction itself must, by abandoning the scene, censor the moment of choice and not show Lincoln making an impossible choice, for both the sake of the scene and for that of the myth.”

*Cahiers* reads the edit before declaring the decision as essentially a foreshadowing of the later dilemma of having to choose which of the two boys is guilty (and following their mother's determination, not deciding between them). They declare it is impossible to decide between two cooks.[34] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In glossing this part of the *Cahiers* essay, Peter Wollen observes:

“Unable to choose, he tastes first one, then the other, proclaiming each in turn excellent, until they have both been completely devoured. Clearly, this is a gag, a light-hearted interpolation into the narrative. However, it is also, I think, an allusion to the Civil War and the view expressed by Lincoln is not simply that both slices of pie are good, but that both sides in the Civil War, North and South, are good: Lincoln, the bringer of unity rather than division.” [p. 45]

But there's another aspect to the sequence. It's a classic sort of gag: being indecisive, he gets to eat more. Indeed, at the start of the tug o'war (three hours later in diegetic time), Lincoln appears in a crowd longshot still stuffing his pie hole. And behind this, unstated in the film, is why is Abe Lincoln the judge? Every woman knows that he is one of the most eligible bachelors in Springfield (established with Mary Todd maneuvering an introduction), and every woman knows that bachelors are always hungry for home cooked food (reinforced later when the Clay women offer turnip greens for dinner when Lincoln visits the farm—his favorite food), and thus he'd be the perfect person to judge the pies.

And behind this, also unstated, the commonplace folk wisdom that “the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.”[35] This cluster of silent assumptions lies behind the scene, giving force to one of the often-noted Fordian tropes: a depiction of community through the presentation of familiar folksy characters, a “peasant cinema,” as Bertrand Tavernier once termed it.[36] Thus the gag is not just a joke,



At the establishing shot of the tug o'war, three hours after the pie contest, Abe appears, moving to the rear of his team to be the anchorman. He is still stuffing pie in his mouth.



Ann Rutledge finds Abe reading his law book by the river and walks and talks with him. Taking the initiative, she reveals she will be going away for education and hopes that Abe would go to college in the same town.



In a symbolic wedding, under a curving tree and beside a flowing river, Abe utters the word "love" while returning her basket of flowers. Hands connected, he says "I do." *Cahiers* sees a deep connection of Woman-Nature-Law.



At the parade Lincoln moves on to compliment

a comic exclamation mark (he's tricking them into getting to eat two pies), but also presents a received wisdom, a reinforcement of grassroots knowledge, and one particularly known by the community of women.

The *Cahiers'* blindness to this aspect of the scene is hardly egregious in terms of interpretation, and their main point about Lincoln being a unifier stands. And indeed, this very fine reading of all the strands of a developing narrative is exactly what is new in film analysis at this point in history. But *Cahiers* tends to slight various points in *Young Mr. Lincoln* that are probably read by women viewers with more sophistication and nuance that the *Cahiers* editors can muster.

Consider the arrival of Lincoln's "first love," Anne Rutledge. Neither *Cahiers* nor any of the subsequent (male) commentators on the film notice two significant details in the scene. After Ann arrives and says hello, Lincoln who had been seated, leaning against a tree trunk, says,

**Lincoln.** (rising) Hello Ann. Give me a minute to kind of untangle myself,

**Ann.** Aren't you afraid you'll put your eyes out, reading like that upside down.

This marks that she had been watching him earlier, unseen, when he was lying on his back with his long legs stretched out up the tree trunk. The meeting is not fortuitous; and (to be Lacanian about it) she possessed the gaze (off-screen, but she initiated the meeting). She says clearly that he is smart, and ambitious, and while Lincoln defers with a kind of shy folksy modesty, averring,

**Lincoln.** Got to have education to get anywhere. I never went to school as much as a year in my whole life.

**Rutledge.** But you've educated yourself! You've read poetry, and Shakespeare, and now Law. [pause] I just had my heart set on you're going over to Jacksonville to college when I go to the seminary there. And....

[long significant pause]

**Lincoln.** You're mighty pretty, Ann.

**Rutledge.** Some folks I know don't like red hair

**Lincoln.** I do

**Rutledge.** Do ya, Abe?

**Lincoln.** I love red hair

[Silence, they join hands on the basket.][37]

The scene has him actually uttering the word "love," and the pair joining hands on the flower basket, uniting them in a kind of symbolic marriage. Throughout the scene Ann Rutledge *plays* at being demure, but actually stages the scene. She finds him, reveals she's been watching him, compliments him on his mind and his ambition, expresses her desire that he go away to Jacksonville with her. Few women would miss just how proactive she is in the scene, though many guys, just like Abe, wouldn't quite figure it out.

If we're alert to this aspect of the narrative, all the appearances of Mary Todd are revealed as classic examples of a Southern Belle using "feminine charm" to push her own agenda and interests. After being formally introduced by her sister as visiting Springfield from Lexington (Kentucky), Lincoln bows. He sees she is seated next to Stephen Douglas who gives his rival a cold stare. Rather than continuing the exchange, Lincoln accedes to Douglas being the alpha dog and sits back down on the curb. Todd then takes the initiative to ask more about him, and Lincoln replies with self-deprecating humor. Later, she takes the initiative to invite him to the party and dance. When he arrives, Lincoln chats with a group of older men until Todd fetches him and insists, against his protestations that he hasn't learned to dance, that he take her to the floor.

She scolds him into dancing, and again scolds him for his lack of grace in dancing and thus induces him going to the balcony with her. This light domination is well-recognized as a Southern Belle technique to gain some power within the gender



Ninian Edwards (grey hat) on the quality of the parade at what seems like the formal or informal reviewing stand. Anyone familiar with small towns would understand the compliment is most likely appropriate because Edwards was probably a key organizer of the event and possibly a financial backer of the celebration. ...



... Lincoln, the freshman lawyer, would defer to the higher status Edwards. Lincoln sits on the curb, but rises when Mrs. Edwards introduces her sister, Mary Todd, visiting from Lexington, Kentucky.



Seated next to Stephen Douglas, Mary Todd takes the initiative and asks Lincoln about himself. Douglas exhibits coldness to Lincoln, while Lincoln and Todd trade glances.

imbalance. Men have to accede to a woman's minor requests, being "a gentleman," and thus women get to take temporary charge of the situation, even criticizing the man's behavior in order to get what they want. Criticism spoken, the man is put in a position to try to please with the next action. But, significantly, the balcony scene ends with Lincoln spellbound by the river, and Mary Todd dropping out of the picture: literally, out of the frame.

Notably, Mary Todd sits with Lincoln's rival, Steven Douglas, at the trial, and in the evening after the first day passes by Lincoln's office window in an open carriage with Douglas, clearly showing Lincoln who she is with, and asking Douglas about his political plans. The editors point out that the shot sequence is such that it "allows" Lincoln to overhear the remark. *Cahiers* reads the moment thus: "...everything in Mary Todd's behaviour, look, and gestures points to her obvious spite, and to her speech as a denial of her desire." But, from a woman's point of view, the action reveals her continuing interest in Lincoln, and willingness to use feminine wiles (Abe's rivalry with Douglas) to keep him interested by provoking potential jealousy. The *Cahiers* boys don't seem to catch on to the trick.

## Foreshadowing Cass' guilt

*Cahiers* doesn't discuss it, only labeling them "bad boys," but various clues appear early in the film marking J. Palmer Cass and his companion Scrub White as bully characters. At the Independence Day Parade and the fair during the pie contest, just as the Clay family arrives to see the event, Cass is briefly seen grabbing a small jug (presumed to be liquor) from an onlooker. The fellow protests the theft, and Cass' buddy, Scrub, wearing a deputy sheriff's badge, roughly pushes the fellow to the ground. The action is quite fast, leaving the impression of bullying activity. Then, as the family looks on, Cass encourages Scrub to tease Sarah by brushing his riding crop against the side of her head. She brushes the irritation, as if it were an insect and as Scrub and Cass laugh, finally she realizes she is being harassed and draws closer to her husband and infant.[38] The guys move away.

During the Tug O'War, Cass and Scrub again stand behind the family, and Scrub again teases her with the whip end while Cass is amused. Again, she tries to withdraw, but when the cord is dangled in front of her, her husband notices and responds, "Leave my wife alone." Scrub challenges Matt and pushes him with his arm. Mrs. Clay intervenes telling the intruders to leave them alone, and they leave, but Scrub calls out, "Bye Honey, see you later." Cass laughs with his friend through the whole episode. Public sexual harassment in the form of teasing and violating personal space physically and verbally: Cass is guilty of aiding and abetting. *Cahiers* passes this off as "an incident between the family and two roughnecks." [39]

At the murder scene, Cass is deputized on the spot by the Sheriff and escorts the boys to the jail. Once the crowd gets unruly, Cass first tries to leave. Looking desperate, he appeals to the sheriff, "Open it up, Sheriff! Let me get out of here!" But the lawman won't allow it. Then, standing against the jailhouse door, with the crowd having begun to pound the door with a log as a battering ram, Cass cowers. Seeing his deputy badge, he takes it off and throws it away: definitively revealing his cowardice. Cowardice at least to a U.S. audience; *Cahiers* on the final trial moments: "...Cass, around whom the whole film has accumulated the clichés of hypervirility...." A deputy throwing away his badge is just the opposite of "virile" in U.S. understandings of appropriate masculinity.





At the edge of the pie contest onlookers, J. Palmer Cass grabs a jug of whiskey from a fellow. When he protests, Cass's buddy, deputy Scrub White, pushes the guy to the ground. The Clay family arrives.



The bully boys continue their antics. As Cass holds the stolen jug of liquor, White uses the end of his riding crop to tease Sara Clay who is watching the pie contest with her husband, baby, and other family members.



Sara first thinks an insect brushed her hair, but then realizes the laughing bullies are sexually harassing her.



The jerks move off, laughing about their clever dickishness.



Later, while the Clay family watches the tug o'war, Clay and White recommence their sexist invasion of personal space ...



... as White again touches Sara.



Matt Clay confronts White, telling him, "leave my wife alone!" White is belligerent and pushes the husband while his buddy Cass chortles.





With a lynch mob outside trying to break in, Cass cries out for the Sheriff to open the door and let him get out. The Sheriff refuses. Cass exhibits extreme fear at the situation, and eyeing his new deputy badge, takes it off and throws it away, demonstrating his cowardice.

## Lynching (an aside)

Of course, *Cahiers* discusses the entire lynching scene in some depth. And they observe that lynching was an issue in the United States c. 1939, referencing several films: *Fury* (Lang, 1936), *They Won't Forget* (LeRoy, 1937) and *Black Legion* (Mayo, 1937). In his later comments, Ben Brewster mentions these films involve only whites whereas lynching was an issue at the time for black Americans.

Lynching, killing by mob action outside of the judicial system, and its role in the United States as racial terrorism is a large topic that has received increasing attention in recent years. It's much too big a topic to elaborate here, but we can mark two aspects in relation to cinema. Roughly there are two phases to lynching as a practice. The first is linked to the frontier and is framed (read excused) within a justice system still in formation. Actually, it is most often employed as a power play by dominant parties against minorities and opposition elements (and was thus used against abolitionists in the pre-war South and rebellious slaves). In fiction, lynching reappears as a common narrative trope about transition in the West in various forms, especially cattlemen vs. farmers, gunslingers vs. lawmen, and so forth. The lynching, as a group activity and public spectacle, often of someone already in custody taken forcibly from jail, appears again and again in written and cinematic fiction, long after the closing of the frontier.

The second phase in U.S. history begins with the end of Reconstruction in 1876, and the growth of racial terrorism visited on African Americans, especially in the South, as whites tried to re-establish their power. It is especially worth noting that African American women were the leaders in anti-lynching campaigns and organizations, and that asking for Federal intervention was a recurrent legislative issue Republicans put forward federal anti-lynching legislation in Congress only to have it blocked by Southern Democrat filibuster in the Senate. In U.S. film history then, due to the prominence of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the ongoing organizing against the film by the NAACP, depictions of lynching were always heavily charged. Although effective organizing had actually reduced the incidence of lynching in the 1930s, from 1931-1937 the trials and retrials of the "Scottsboro Boys," a group of black men accused of raping two white women, was an ongoing national story that highlighted racial injustice in Alabama. The initial events included an attempted lynching. Lynching was still a potent issue as seen by the 1940 bestseller status of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's novel, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a white-on-white violence Western that was subsequently made into a 1943 film starring Henry Fonda (d. William Wellman). Racial lynching was famously addressed by Billie Holiday's performance of the song *Strange Fruit* (1939), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Thorpe, 1939) includes a finale with Huck (Mickey Rooney) arriving just in time to save Jim (Rex Ingram) from a lynch mob.

## On method

The *Cahiers YML* analysis shows just how dense and complex a "classic cinema" film can be. At the start, discussing methodology, they explain that they will not be doing the usual modes of writing a commentary (distilling "an ideally constituted sense presented as the object's ultimate meaning") nor offering a new interpretation ("the translation of what is supposed to be already in the film into a critical system"), nor a dissection (in the familiar mode of French rhetorical explication which they see as mechanical), nor a demystification (in the mechanical materialist mode of *Cinéthique*). They explicitly refer to Walter Benjamin's idea to consider an artwork not as a direct reflection of the relations of production (a vulgar Marxist view that the superstructure simply reflects the economic base), but rather as having a place within production (that is the author considered as producer). Their reference to Macherey also shows concern for the production of meaning rather than just assuming it is immanent in the work.[40] By pursuing their method of "active reading" *Cahiers* is moving from a synchronic analysis to a diachronic one. Thus they discuss the film by breaking it down from scene to scene and showing the gradual emergence and unfolding of meaning. This





At the conclusion of the film, Lincoln and the restored Clay family part. They leave in their wagon, and Abe decides to walk to the top of the hill.



As Lincoln approaches the top of the hill a storm begins: thunder, lightening, and rain. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the North’s militant anthem during the Civil War rises on the soundtrack with the thunder sounding much like cannon fire, the flash of lightening appearing much like battlefield explosions. Emotionally the scene portends Lincoln’s future role in the Civil War. *Cahiers* reads this scene as showing Lincoln as monstrous, “an intolerable figure.”

way of working through a film text is clearly indebted to Roland Barthes then-recently-published book, *S/Z*. [41]

Actually proceeding along with the *Cahiers* reading, one senses that they were not only working as a group with divergent talents and interests but also that they were absorbing everything they could from every different possible source. But from a perspective of 40 years later, their use of psychoanalysis seems especially stunted and dated.

“Thus if the dance scene signifies the hero’s social recognition (reward), the dance with Mary Todd puts him into a real castration, the retroactive effect of the lynching scene (which already implied it logically, writing it into the unconscious of Ford’s text). There the castrating action was made on the basis of a castration which becomes effective in the dance scene and particularly in the balcony scene... Ann’s death must be read as the real origin both of his castration and of his identification with the Law; and the “inversion” of the dance scene as well as its relation to the lynching scene take on their true meaning: Lincoln does not have the phallus, he is the phallus (see Lacan “La signification du phallus”).”

A relatively short time later in the mix (could we say maelstrom?) of film theory the common meme would be “the text produces the subject,” that is, that through its complex and dynamic unfolding (demonstrated through the vast detailing of close analysis) a film produces a meaning-effect for the individual receiving it. But that theoretical position—stridently argued as it was—soon had to give way to a more sophisticated understanding, that “meaning” is created by the interaction of a text and a reader/audience and that the audience is historically and socially situated (thus allowing for richer views of cultural difference, gender, identity, and so forth), and that any one individual has a somewhat idiosyncratic reading of the work.

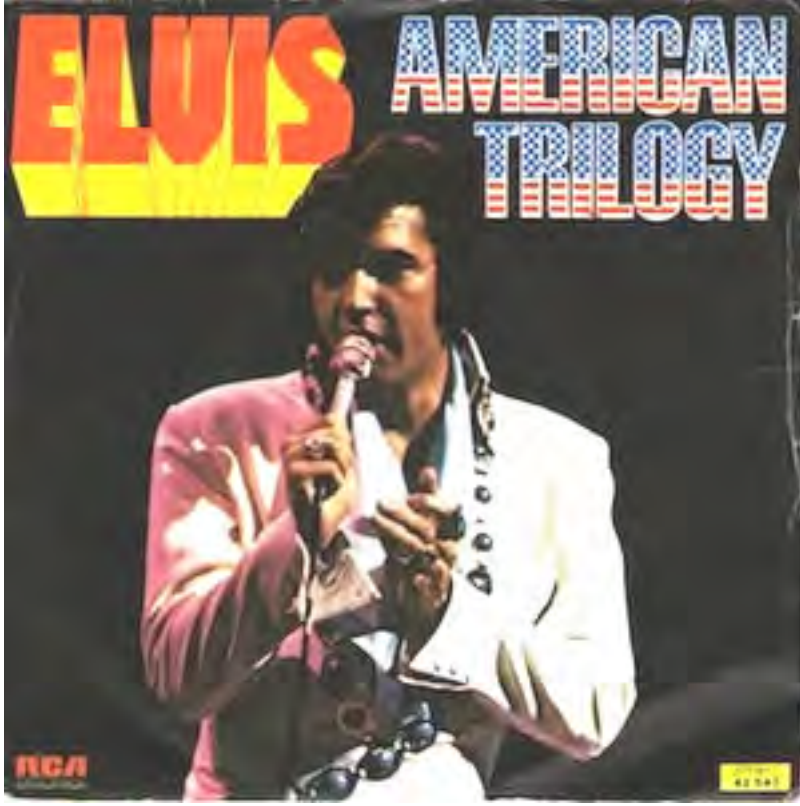
In retrospect, the stance on *YML* is skewed by resting on the unsupported assumption of the producer’s intention. There is no clear external evidence for this, and although internal textual evidence can be found, and *Cahiers* does find it, they assume that the piece as a whole marches toward a singular conclusion: Lincoln mythic and eternal. But another plausible reading can be supported: the film largely operates to validate the shrewd wit of Honest Abe, frontier man of the people. The conclusion, with Lincoln cheered for the trial victory by an offscreen throng, stepping onto a balcony to face the public, can be read as an uplifting finale, a sudden rise which forecasts the (well-known) future: the famous debates with Douglas, the Presidency while conducting the Civil War.

Famously, *Cahiers* describes the last scenes of the film as presenting Lincoln as “an intolerable figure”—stressing “his castrating power” and “excessive violence,” in interrogating Cass to get the confession. [42] In the final scene, they argue,

“...it is the excesses of Ford’s writing (accumulation of lightening, rain, wind, thunder, etc.) which by overlaying all the clichés, underlines the monstrous character of the figure of Lincoln: he leaves the frame and the film (like *Nosferatu*) as if it had become impossible for him to be filmed any longer; *he is an intolerable figure*,...”

And yet this grand finale also reads metonymically as a reference to his greatest future task. The wind, thunder, and lightening all read as foreshadowing of the wartime battlefield with thunder sounding much like distant cannon fire. And the swelling music (which *Cahiers* doesn’t mention) is “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the North’s Civil War anthem. [43] Is Ford being excessive? Or does he just more deeply understand the collective psyche of the U.S. audience? We might reality check by comparing Ford’s final scene with, say, the famous Elvis Presley showstopper of his 70s shows. “An American Trilogy” wove together “Dixie,” “All My Trials,” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic” in a stadium performance finale that always brought the audience to its feet and an emotional peak. Sentiment, tears, patriotism, the grand gesture. [44]





In the U.S. context, *YML*'s grand conclusion with over-the-top effects and sentiment may seem less "monstrous" than well within the popular American vein. In the later part of his performance career, Elvis Presley ended his shows with "American Trilogy" a grand finale in which he sang parts of "Dixie," "Hush Little Children," and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in an oversaturated sentimental medley drawing on some of the most predictable and banal clichés of U.S. culture. It always brought the audience to its feet, moved even to tears, and then applause.

## Summing it up

Because the *YML* study was one moment in a longer and complicated process, any attempt to discuss it ends up freezing the essay: catching it as a finish line photo that can show some relations to what surrounded it but not explaining where it came from and how it fit into what happened later. Reading it today, we need to think of it in terms of two larger theoretical matters in film analysis: realism and Bazin's aesthetics.

These are themselves big issues that need (and already have) book-length consideration, but I'll reduce them to a simple shorthand. Bazin's vastly influential postwar formulations rested on a core conception of a unitary and coherent subject, a fully formed person, understanding a film. Film has a special ability to capture the impression of reality. For the French theorist, the process is fairly transparent, and therefore realism is good. The major historically contrasting movements to realism at the time were Expressionism and (Russian) Formalism in which directors heavily and obviously manipulated the film to deliver strong emotional (and intellectual) effects. In contrast, the humanist mood of realism (especially Italian Neo-realism) seemed to give the audience a more democratic, less dramatic, less manipulated experience.

Because in this model "content" is largely pre-given, a fairly transparent form is good, and the film can be well discussed as a unitary experience, a memorial experience. Meaning can be summed up nicely. But from the later 1950s on a counter-trend gained considerable intellectual force in France.[45] Brecht's work in theatre and his aesthetic and political concerns offered a powerful critique of conventional realism. Increasingly known after his long exile from Hitler's Germany, and providing a clear alternative to Stalinist period Soviet art while remaining obviously Left, Brecht challenged realism by offering the idea that progressive theater should disrupt the audience, challenge it, open up space for active rather than passive spectatorship. And complimentary examples appeared in the 1960s, both in Theatre of the Absurd on stage and within the New Wave most obviously with Godard's obvious fascination with a Brechtian aesthetic.[46]

We can see the results of these trends in post-68 *Cahiers*. Picking upon Brecht's critique of a passive audience, blandly consuming a "culinary" theatre, and having an Aristotlean catharsis that raised emotions and problems only to wash them away, they turned against realism.[47] A bold innovation in the *YML* essay is to shift attention to the films dynamic process, to the process of signification. We can counterpose *Cahiers*' position as "the (dynamic, unfolding) film creates meaning" against Bazin's classic formulation, "style creates meaning." For Bazin "style," or at least accomplished style, was something an auteur-director had as an expressive core and could use in shaping a pre-given content. *Cahiers*, in contrast and in the *YML* piece, argues that the text is not coherent, it has absences and fissures, at least some of which are more readily revealed by looking at unconscious elements. Therefore, to study the film text one must consider it as mostly in process, in motion: thus the scene-by-scene breakdown in the *YML* essay. And one should assume that the subject-viewer is not a unified being, but rather is in constant adjustment during the film. Given the (relatively new, at least to them) idea that ideology produces subjectivity, Bazin's model produced a conformist spectator experience.[48] While championing an active, avant garde, Brechtian cinema, *Cahiers* found a way to still validate some apparently mainstream films, the "category e" group because those films, with their cracks and contradictions, produced a disrupted and thus (potentially) progressive subject/viewer experience.

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### A student's guide to the *YML* essay — an annotated bibliography

Today's student can best understand the *Young Mr. Lincoln* essay by first seeing the film, and having it fresh in mind, reading the *Cahiers* analysis. Because most of the discussion moves through the film scene by scene, having reference to a DVD copy allows the student to check the argument as it proceeds.

The Criterion Collection, no. 320: *Young Mr. Lincoln* (2 discs) directed by John Ford.

Today's English-speaking student may find the *Cahiers YML* essay slow going at times. The French expository style differs from the bread-and-butter Anglo-American essay form. Part of this can be understood as characteristic of an intellectual community based in one city where everyone at least knows of each other, has the same opportunities for film viewing, and reads the same "background" discussions. The essay also exists within a specific decade-long film culture in and around *Cahiers*. In that framework, the writers could assume that their readers had been regularly following earlier discussions. Thus the somewhat opaque references to Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, and others: at the time their core readers really did know, or know about, these figures. Further, French intellectual discussions are entrenched in French culture as public spectator sport, at least among the professional classes.[49] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The result: density.

The actual essay is available in several places:

[collective text], "'Young Mr Lincoln' de John Ford." *Cahiers du cinéma*. 223 (August 1970): 29-47. Print.

[A collective text by the Editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*]. "John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*." *Screen* [UK] 13.3 (1972): 5-44. Print. Tr. Helen Lackner and Diana Matias.

Reprinted: Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods: An Anthology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976), 493-529.

Reprinted: John Ellis, ed., *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977), 113-152.

Reprinted: Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Second edition (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 778-

831. [The article did not appear in the 1974 first edition of this workhorse anthology.]

Reprinted: Mast and Cohen, Third edition, 1985, 695-740. [As with the earlier reprint in 1979, includes two production stills, the second of which (Lincoln and Mary Todd talking outside the dance) was from a segment edited out of the film. The essay was dropped from the Fourth edition.]

Reprinted: Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 445-482.

### An essential companion text:

Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" in Browne, Nick, ed. *Cahiers Du Cinéma, 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. Pp. 58-67. Also widely reprinted in *Screen*, *Screen Reader*, Rosen, Mast and Cohen's later editions, etc.

### The *Cahiers* piece appeared in English with a short editorial introduction and a short afterward:

Rhodie, Sam. "Editorial." *Screen* (U.K.) 13.3 (1972): 2-3. Print.

Wollen, Peter. "Afterword [to *Cahiers YML*]." *Screen* 13.3 (1972). Print.

### And a year later, an additional discussion appeared:

Brewster, Ben. "Notes on the Text, "Young Mr. Lincoln," by the Editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*." *Screen* 14.3 (1973): 29-43. Print.

In the context of an issue of *Screen* on Metz's semiotics, Brewster makes some introductory connections and then provides a thoughtful extension of *Cahiers* points in terms of Marxist discussion. He concludes by observing that the *YML* analysis has a foundation in authorship study.

### Across the Atlantic, the essay was discussed in significant articles:

Nichols, Bill. "Style, Grammar, and the Movies." *Film Quarterly* 28.3 (1975). Print.

Nichols, promoting Gregory Bateson's ideas, faults *Cahiers* for using binary oppositions and calls for a theory/practice of mediation to produce a better analysis.

Henderson, Brian. "Critique of Cine-Structuralism, Part II." *Film Quarterly* 27.2 (1973-1974). Print. Reprinted in Henderson, Brian. *A Critique of Film Theory*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980. Print.

Henderson uses very long quoted sections of the *YML* essay to introduce it to U.S. readers. (At the time *Film Quarterly* was the



prestige film journal with a very wide circulation in schools and public libraries as well as a large subscriber base; *Screen* only circulated dozens of copies in N. America.) He then goes on a tedious rampage against Ben Brewster's article introducing Metz, apparently seeing it as a return to classic auteur theory (which it is not).

MacBean, James Roy. *Film and Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975. Print.

MacBean's key book collects the major articles he wrote on Godard (and Godard-Gorin)'s left films, and other essential left films of the 60s-70s, for *Film Quarterly*. His concluding chapter includes a criticism of English-speaking commenters for discussing the *YML* essay in terms of structuralism and semiotics rather than Marxism. (At the time it was obvious he was referring to Henderson.)

Abramson, Ronald, and Richard Thompson. "Young Mr. Lincoln Reconsidered: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Film Criticism." *Ciné-Tracts: A journal of film and cultural studies* 2.1 (no. 5) (1978): 42-62. Print.

The authors, former students of Henderson and Dudley Andrew, are critical of various parts of the *Cahiers* article while adding their own arguments and observations. Reprinted online:

<http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/22/young-mr-lincoln-reconsidered.html>

Some broader perspectives supply essential contexts for understanding the *YML* essay in its own historical moment and in terms of the evolution of film theory in general:

Browne, Nick, ed. *Cahiers du cinéma, 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. Print.

Browne's contribution to the four volume collection of key articles in translation concentrates on the most political phase of *Cahiers'* history. Surprisingly, it was decided to omit the *YML* essay since it was so widely available elsewhere at the time of publication. Browne's superb and concise introduction frames the *Cahiers* project and points out the connections to other essays in the collection.

Bickerton, Émilie. *A Short History of Cahiers du cinéma*. London: Verso, 2009. Print.

This brief overview of the entire history of *Cahiers* is light on the magazine's theoretical/critical progress, but it offers important framing in terms of people, personalities, and institutional frame.

Harvey, Sylvia. *May '68 and Film Culture*. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1978. Print.

Harvey provides a detailed discussion of the late 60s moment in

Parisian film circles and discussion of the *Cahiers* and Cinéthique differences. Essential reading for understanding the political issues.

Lellis, George Patrick. "From Formalism to Brecht: The Development of a Political and Aesthetic Sensibility in *Cahiers du cinéma*." Dissertation: University of Texas, 1976. Print.

Extremely clear history of the major changes in *Cahiers*.

Lesage, Julia. "The Films of Jean Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory." Dissertation: Indiana University, 1976. Print.

Baecque, Antoine de. *Les Cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d'une revue*. Paris: *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1991. 2 volumes. Print.

Fairfax, Daniel. "'Yes, We Were Utopians; in a Way, I Still Am...': An Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli (Part 1)." *Senses of Cinema*. 62 (2012). Web.

Interesting personal retrospective view of the heady post-68 years of *Cahiers*.

Casetti, Francesco. *Theories of Cinema: 1945-1995*. Trans. Chiostrì, Francesca and Elizabeth Gard Bartolini-Salimbeni, with Thomas Kelso. revised edition, updated ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. Print.

Casetti's historical survey of post WW2 film theory gains much from his vantage point outside of France, the UK and US. Although he sacrifices some breadth and depth, he lays out the central concerns with a sensible accuracy. Best starting point for grasping the big issues.

Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.

When it first appeared 25 years ago Bordwell's book was seen as a salvo in the "cognitivist" critique of "post-structuralist" theory. Today it reads as a witty survey of developing film studies that deals with institutional, logical, and pragmatic issues in the frame of rhetorical analysis. Contains a concise discussion of the *YML* essay (pp 84-87) and then deploys the reference throughout the book's argument. Especially useful for drawing connections between critics who saw themselves as opposed to each other or actually antagonistic.

Lapsley, Robert, and Michael Westlake. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988. Print.

This narrowly UK-centric presentation of the field stays well within the Screen orbit of the 70s. Film theory is understood as moving ineluctably and teleologically away from Marxist politics and toward Lacanian poststructuralism. An extended discussion of the *YML* article (pp. 116-123) concludes, "...the analysis was, like Wollen's



*Signs and Meaning*, a transitional text, bridging one organizing conception based on authorial intention and another based on textual productivity.”

Rushton, Richard, and Gary Bettinson. *What Is Film Theory? An Introduction to Contemporary Debates*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2010. Print.

Proceeding by a series of summaries of key articles/chapters in contemporary film theory, a concise highlighting of *Cahiers* on *YML* (pp. 22-27).

Hill, John. “Ideology, Economy and the British Cinema.” *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Miller, Toby and Robert Stam. Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000. 565-76. Print.

A concentrated discussion of the *Cahiers YML* model as “occluded” usefully contrasts it with institutional, historical, and political economy approaches.

Kleinhans, Chuck. “Marxism and Film.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Eds. Hill, John and Pamela Church-Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 106-13. Print.

Basic background

Klinger, Barbara. “‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’ Revisited: The Progressive Genre.” *Film Genre Reader* iv. Ed. Grant, Barry Keith. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. 93-109. Print.

A particularly apt discussion of how “category e” was deployed by other critics for various purposes.

Wilson, David, ed. *Cahiers du cinéma: Volume 4: 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle*. New York: Routledge 2000. Print.

Presents the aftermath of the intense post-68 *Cahiers*. Includes a useful introductory essay by Berénice Reynaud.

Hillier, Jim, ed. *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. Print.

Hillier, Jim, ed. *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1960s: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1986. Print.

Essential background to post-68 *Cahiers*.

Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000. Print.

A very different take on film theory with little attention to *Cahiers*, Stam goes for great expansive coverage (of topics, of places, etc.) by sacrificing depth. Best as a start on doing one’s own further reading.

Other works on Ford:

Sarris, Andrew. *The John Ford Movie Mystery*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975. Print.

Auteur study.

Gallagher, Tag. *John Ford: The Man and His Films*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Print.

Comprehensive auteur study with detailed discussion of *YML*, pp. 162-174. Specifically critical of the *Cahiers* reading. Gallagher has a unique discussion of music motifs in the film, and within auteur study orthodoxy offers interesting discussion of Ford's value system and outlook as embedded in character and narration.

Gallagher, Tag. "Passage: John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*." *Senses of Cinema* (2006). Web. [http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/39/young\\_mr\\_lincoln/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/39/young_mr_lincoln/)

Gallagher continues to plow the *YML* field, this time with lots of images, indicating a theme of "passage"—both literal and figurative. An interesting riff, but couldn't the term/concept be applied to almost any film except a chamber drama?

Routt, Bill. "Ford at Fox. 3(c)" [section on *YML*] (2012?). Web. *Screening the past*, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/07/ford-at-fox/>

Eisenberg, Emanuel. "John Ford: Fighting Irishman." *New Theater and Film: 1934-1937: An Anthology*. 1936. Ed. Kline, Herbert. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. 267-271. Print.

Enthusiastic interview with Ford stressing his rebellious nature (making *The Informer*, including anti-lynching scenes, and detesting studio bosses).

Eisenstein, Sergei. "Mr. Lincoln by Mr. Ford." *Eisenstein: Writings 1934-1947*. Ed. Taylor, Richard. Vol. 3. London: British Film Institute, 1996. Print.

Eisenstein's 1945 enthusiasm for *YML* gives it good leftist credentials.

Andrew, J. Dudley. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Print.

An extremely brief presentation of film semiology includes a panicked reaction to Marxism, *Cahiers* and "Cinétique" (sic), pp 236-241

Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.

Years later Andrew returns to a much fuller discussion of new theory which (earnestly) tries to be descriptive but which constantly reveals its own anxieties through textual disruption and quite a few



“signifying absences.”

Horrigan, Bill. "Andre Bazin's Destiny." *Jump Cut*. 19 (1978). Web.  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC19folder/BazinHorriganRev.html>

Discussion of Dudley Andrew's book on Bazin as mounting a defense of the Frenchman from an assault by newfangled political film folk.

Balio, Tino. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939. History of the American Cinema*. Ed. Harpole, Charles. Vol. 5. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Print.

Jurca, Catherine. *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures' Greatest Year*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. Print.

Custen, George F. *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.

### Useful contextualizing of *Screen* c. 1970:

Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey, and Cristophe Dupin, eds. *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933-2000*. Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 2012. Print.

Bolas, Terry. *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies*. Bristol UK: Intellect, 2009. Print.

Grieverson, Lee, and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Inventing Film Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. Print.

### Afterword and aside: why so angry?

The *YML* essay was itself contentious when it appeared. It openly includes a strong criticism of the positions taken by the rival left film magazine *Cinéthique*, mentioned by name. Unsurprisingly the article entered the intense debates of Parisian film culture politics. But on publication in translation it also appeared under a combative banner. Sam Rhodie, the new editor of *Screen*, began the Autumn 1972 issue that highlighted the *YML* essay with a brief summary context and introduction. But the issue also contained an article by John Smith on Hitchcock's English films, and Rhodie is clearly hostile and dismissive of the article he is publishing.

“If *Cahiers* explores 'breaks,' Smith is after unities and synthesis and the films which appear most coherent (form and content perfectly integrated) are those which are deemed 'best.'...Smith relates to an older and I think incorrect aesthetic position...[a] species of [untenable] romantic aesthetics....”

Why is Rhodie publishing the piece if it is so aesthetically incorrect? And why is he compelled to make such a declaration against it? The issue also includes the second half of an article by Steven Mamber on “Cinema-Verite in America,”

along with a long letter from Mamber complaining about editorial changes to the first half, apparently published without his knowing about the alterations or having a chance to see them before publication.[50]

So the very kick off of the *YML* essay in English is clouded with hostility. It didn't take long for the discussion to warm up across the Atlantic. Writing two years later in *Film Quarterly* about the *YML* essay and a follow-up article from Screen by Ben Brewster, Brian Henderson recapitulates much of the *Cahiers* article, with some extraordinarily long direct quotes from the original. He quotes very extensive passages: eight sequential paragraphs; four paragraphs; three paragraphs; and then three paragraphs.[51]

He then takes issue with Brewster's article

“...he violates the *Cahiers* concept, indeed he obliterates it,...the principal direction of Brewster's article is that of a regression....  
“...bridging this gap is ambiguous at best and fishy at worst...he fails to bridge this gap....Aside from other defects, this is an alarming reduction and simplification...Brewster's conclusion is a shock. One is astonished that this is what Brewster's analysis has led to, the return of the author. Nothing has prepared one for this....The nominal project of integrating Metzism reduced to a shell with a denatured “Young Mr. Lincoln” sets up the mutual collapse that Brewster's text has engineered....A carefully built house of cards collapses abruptly;....” [I'll show mercy and stop quoting here: the last four paragraphs of Henderson's article become quite florid—CK.]

Henderson's passion is clear: he reads what Brewster is doing as a betrayal. But at the time, and especially today, to almost all readers Brewster seemed to be making a rather common sense point: that while *Cahiers* claims it is moving beyond the earlier Bazinian and auteur foundations of the magazine's outlook, in fact its approach is still informed by (though not slavishly dependent on) the concept of authorship. (Much as one cannot un-ring a bell, I suppose.)

Hostile exceptions to the *Cahiers* approach multiplied in the 70s. Two of Henderson's students, Abramson and Thompson added to the critique with their own different reading/interpretation. And the dean of conservative film aesthetics, Dudley Andrew, addresses the post-68 moment of *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique*[52] briefly in a few pages of his 1976 *The Major Film Theories*, and then the much larger international context of new theory in his *Concepts of Film Theory* (1984). Andrews' writing style itself invites a symptomatic reading. His honest commitment to a fair, if not neutral, discussion of the new direction, particularly the most politicized examples is undermined by his obvious discomfort with left politics and gender issues. The result is more than a trace of male hysteria in expressing his alarm at this new arrival in film studies.

Of course we would expect change as intellectuals evolve in a longer discussion. Sometimes this was abrupt: within a matter of months *Cahiers* dismissed its earlier phases as it moved toward a Red star-struck Maoism. But often it seemed



that thinkers were holding to a rather linear view of progress that mean the new replaced the old rather than build on it, modified it, or potentiated earlier work. Perhaps that way of thinking is built into assuming the “human sciences” advance in a way similar to the natural sciences, and is an easy given in a consumer capitalist society. In the long run, today for example, the *Cahiers* analysis of the Ford film opened up a mainstream commercial narrative film to a profoundly new way of thinking, and much more importantly, it opened up the whole field of dramatic cinema to a deeper political and formal analysis. We live on the other side of that moment.

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### Notes

1. I provide a contextual overview of Marxist analysis in Chuck Kleinhans, “Marxism and Film,” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 106-113. [\[return to text\]](#)
2. For example, in his 1975 book *The John Ford Movie Mystery*, Andrew Sarris makes several errors in discussing *YML*. He says the opening speech takes place in Springfield, Illinois, whereas the scene’s title card locates it Lincoln’s home town, New Salem, about 20 miles away. At Ann Rutledge’s New Salem graveside, he mistakenly identifies the place as Kentucky, and forgets that Lincoln chooses where to go by letting a stick fall, claiming erroneously that the young man flips a coin. (p. 88).
3. I once asked someone familiar with the Parisian film scene c. 1970 how certain films had been selected for what then became model essays (e.g. Bellour on *The Birds*; Metz on *Adieu Philippine*) and I was told that availability of a print for repeated viewing (especially on an editing table) was the primary determinant. *Cahiers* clearly states that they are not selecting *YML* as a canonical masterpiece but as an illustrative example of classic Hollywood.
4. For a concise discussion of the politics of auteur theory, see John Hess’s essays in JUMP CUT:  
“La politique des auteurs (part one) World view as aesthetics”  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCo1folder/auturism1.html>  
“La politique des auteurs, 2 Truffaut’s manifesto”  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCo2folder/auteur2.html>
5. The same issue contained semiotician Raymond Bellour’s shot-by-shot analysis of the Bodega Bay sequence from Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, a milestone in dissecting Hollywood film: the elation of cinephilia was replaced by the science of autopsy.
6. Representative key articles and an interpretive historical intro can be found in volumes 3 and 4 of the Harvard anthologies on *Cahiers du cinéma* (see biblio essay at the end of this article).
7. Jorge Larraín, “Ideology” in Tom Bottomore et al., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), p 2-19.
8. Sherry Turkle’s *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud’s French Revolution* (NY: Basic Books, 1978) provides a rich and readable survey of the movement/moment.
9. Althusser’s reputation and stature collapsed when he murdered his wife in 1980. He was found to be insane at the time.
10. Among the essays in this special section, Warren Buckland discusses Althusser’s concept of symptomatic reading (which he saw as starting with



Marx's reading of earlier economists). Buckland goes on to argue that a later elaboration by Slavoj Žižek significantly changes the analysis of such textual symptoms, interpreting them as necessary features rather than anomalies. Buckland, "Symptomatic reading in Althusser, *Cahiers du cinéma*, and Žižek."

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11. Casetti, p. 192.

12. Fairfax, Daniel. "'Yes, We Were Utopians; in a Way, I Still Am...': An Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli (Part 1)." *Senses of Cinema*. No. 62 (2012). Web.

13. The validation of Douglas Sirk's glossy melodramas is probably the best known example.

14. Curiously, while *Cahiers* investigates *YML* in terms of looking at party affiliation and class position of the people making it, they don't seem to think that they might apply these ideas to their own intellectual work. In the 1969 "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism" essay, Comolli and Narboni briefly acknowledge their magazine's place in the economic structure:

"A magazine, that is to say, a particular product, involving a particular amount of work (on the part of those who write it, those who produce it and, indeed, those who read it). We do not close our eyes to the fact that a product of this nature is situated fairly and squarely inside the economic system of capitalist publishing (modes of production, spheres of circulation, etc.)."

They state the journal's situation, but they do not indicate if they are then salaried or what their own sources of income are. However when they presume to know the reason *YML* was made, they explain it in terms of party affiliation (Republican, the party of Big Business including the banks which control the capitalist studio; and producer Zanuck, also a Republican). But they don't explain their own intellectual project in terms of their party affiliation(s) or *Cahiers* position within the French economy or their own personal situation. According to Bickerton's brief history of *Cahiers*, immediately after the "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism" essay appeared, and in response to it, the publisher, Daniel Filipacchi, decided to sell the publication. A group of old *Cahiers* editors and the present ones cobbled together the funds to buy it. (Bickerton p. 70) Bickerton reports that the magazine was closest to the French Communist party at the time (this would change rapidly in the next two years to their Maoist phase). She also reports that as *Cahiers* turned increasingly left and dedicated to theory, it lost sales (11,000 since 1969). A full Marxist analysis political economy of *Cahiers* at this time would depend on examining the magazines changing economic fortunes (such as income, expenses, salaries, etc.) as well as the editors' own salaries, annual income and net worth.

15. Ben Brewster, shortly after the translation was published:

"The political analysis in paragraphs (3) and (4) seem misconceived: they posit a highly specific aim on the part of the producers of the film which is unsubstantiated, and indeed could not be substantiated, presented as it is in the form of a pure will." "Notes on the Text 'John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*' by the Editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*," *Screen*, 14:3 (1973) p. 38

In the same vein, Bill Nichols, commented on "...the absence of a theory of mediations within historical process. (Ironically, the incredible weakness and superficiality of their analysis of the film's historical context (sections

2-5) has not even been commented upon by presumably Marxist-oriented theorists like Brian Henderson!)” “Style, Grammar, and Movies,” p.619. [first published in *Film Quarterly* 28:3 (Spring 1975)]

Nichols, preface to “John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*,” in *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1976), p. 493: “...the weakness of explanations of the film’s historical determinations ....”

Rushton and Bettinson, “They begin with a series of hasty historical determinants...” p. 23, *What is Film theory?* (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2010)

Any argument about textual meaning that relies on authorial intention has a steep hill to climb in the Anglophone world given the canonical status of William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley’s classic essay on literary analysis, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54 (1946): 468-488.

16. It is also essential to understand that the companies also owned or had controlling interest in theater chains which is where money was made. The studio was the key to artistic production, but finance and theatrical exhibition were central to the whole enterprise as a business.

17. This claim of knowing intention based on party affiliation reappears in some of the critical commentary on Spielberg’s *Lincoln*. Known as a Hollywood liberal and contributor to the Democratic Party, some right wing reviewers and observers immediately read the film as propaganda for Obama’s Presidency.

18. For example in November 2013 U.S. radio pundit Rush Limbaugh has said he believes the disastrous computer problems with the Obamacare enrollment are a deliberate plan to drive the public to demand “single payer” (Federal government) healthcare as part of a grand scheme to increase citizen dependence on government.

19. According to Zanuck biographer George Custen, a close reading of the internal studio memos around that film along with the changes from novel to film shows Zanuck often toning down criticism of the New Deal.

20. As far as I know no one has carefully examined all the available documents on *YML* and constructed a production history. Zanuck’s papers have been considered by Custen among others, but correlation with information on Ford and screenwriter Trotti as well as any other production documents remains open. To confirm the *Cahiers* presumption, it would be especially useful to examine corporate records of the time of both 20th Century Fox and its controlling bank, Chase National.

21. In this vein, it is interesting to consider the difference between Lamar Trotti’s final shooting script and the portions omitted from the actual finished film. Some examples are found on the Criterion DVD extras. It is also curious to find that the left wing Popular Front theatre and film magazine of the era interviewing John Ford as a progressive, praising his film *The Informer*, recording his complaints about financial interests and producers limiting directors and screenwriters, and his commitment to anti-lynching politics: Eisenberg, Emanuel. “John Ford: Fighting Irishman.” *New Theater and Film: 1934-1937: An Anthology*. 1936. Ed. Kline, Herbert. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. 267-271.

22. Althusser had introduced the term “structuring absence” in his early work on reading Marx. He pointed out that Marx himself, in reviewing earlier economists, pointed out that there were certain questions that they





In a dramatic opening sequence in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, young Abe is shown playing with his friend, a black boy. They are in Indiana, a free state, separated by the Ohio River from Kentucky, a slave state. Operating under the Fugitive Slave Law, a slave catcher appears and seizes the boy's parents. The child hurls himself at the man who responds with brute force. Young Abe comes to his friend's aid and is also brutalized. Abe's father comes to his son's rescue, but is then fired from his job. Thus the issue of slavery and the situation of African Americans, both free, runaway, and still enslaved, is entwined with the vampire story, as it is revealed that the vampires find the slave-holding South a perfect environment to prey on (black) humans without raising suspicion, hostility, or resistance.



In the *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter's* dramatic conclusion, the battle of Gettysburg is about to be turned to the Confederacy's advantage by the arrival of vampire troops. Lincoln rides a train filled with vampire-killing silver bullets for the Union troops, but it is attacked by a vampire horde. But, it turns out

simply did not address, but which seemed obvious to later thinkers. These blindspots themselves were “tells” that when spotted revealed something significant about the original analysis: what it repressed, what it couldn't talk about. Combined with the Freudian theory of repression, and the Marxist concept of contradiction, Althusser put forth a direction for textual analysis that many found productive for talking about social, cultural, and artistic practices.

23. Fortunately today, The Criterion Collection now has an excellent DVD version.

24. A similar racial displacement takes place with the issue of lynching which I will discuss later. Another racial trace appears when Mrs. Clay explains that she was widowed when “a drunk Indian” killed her husband. *Cahiers* doesn't mention the Native American and passes the death off as “an accident.”

25. Columbia, a standing woman in neo-classical robes (usually similar to the Stars and Stripes flag motif), was a standard icon for the United States. Later she was overshadowed by the figure of Uncle Sam. Film folks will recognize the figure of Columbia from the start of that studio's motion pictures. In typical Fordian style, in *YML* she is presented as an awkwardly enthusiastic young woman taken up with her sudden celebrity, shouting out recognition to her mother and other female relatives who are typed as rowdy “down home” folk. Later, the mother gets so wrapped up in supporting her side in the Tug O'War she ends up being pulled into the mud puddle along with the men in the comic finale.

26. In contrast, *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* (d. Timur Bekmambetov, 2012) begins with slavery as a central issue. In Free State Indiana, young Abe and an African American boy play together when a slave catcher brutally captures the boy's parents under the Fugitive Slave Law for return to the South. The event's injustice and racism is indelibly marked on the child Lincoln and it serves the rest of the film's progress. *Cahiers* doesn't say it, but by evacuating slavery as an issue, *YML* avoids addressing the human degradation and immorality of slavery and turns it into a different issue: a reflection on labor migration (whites moving West, a much more topical issue in the Depression). As for the usual Hollywood romance line of action, his first love, Ann Rutledge (only present in one scene), dies, and the encounters with his eventual wife, Mary Todd, are subdued in this film.

27. For a particularly good argument along these lines: Jeffrey Sconce, “Esper, the Renunciator,” in *Defining Cult Movies: the Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. (2003). Mark Jancovich (Eds.), Manchester, Manchester University Press.  
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28. The letter of invitation, shown for the audience to read as Abe polishes his shoes and trims his hair, refers to Lincoln's role in stopping “the recent deplorable uprising,” a phrasing that carries its own class markers.

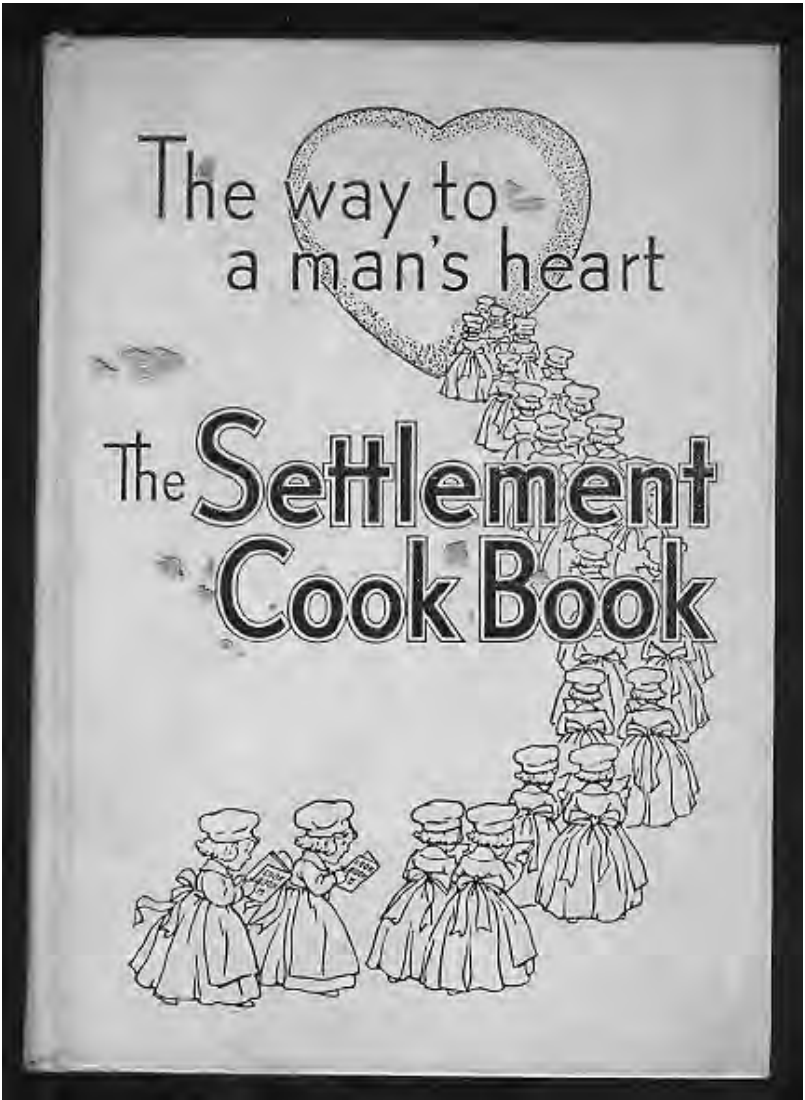
29. There were four candidates who unevenly split the popular vote and the electoral vote:

Candidate	Bracken	Bell	Douglas	Lincoln
states	11	3	1	17
electoral				



the train was a decoy, a hoax, and the actual weaponry has been brought by stealth to the battleground using the Underground Railroad, the secret paths used by runaway slaves in their flight to freedom, and carried by African Americans from Washington D.C. to supply the troops. Mary Todd Lincoln opens a box of silver bayonets on site to begin the fight for freedom. Soon, confronted by the undead enemy, she loads her silver necklace, with a cross on it, in a rifle to kill the leading female vampire in short order.

In contrast to the displacement of race in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, this fantastical rewriting of the Lincoln legend puts the issue of slavery present throughout the narrative and black characters essential to winning the fight.



“The Way to a Man’s Heart: The Settlement Cook Book” by Mrs. Simon (Lizzie Black) Kander, first published in 1901, went through 34 editions and sold over 2 million copies, eventually. This was the go-to cookbook of my late mother-in-law, Sylvia Lewis Lesage, who got her copy shortly after marriage and moving from New York to small town Illinois in the 1930s. Written by a progressive German Jewish social activist from Milwaukee, the cuisine rested solidly in Central European dishes. The message in the title was enacted daily.

votes	72	39	12	180
popular votes	848,019	590,000	1,380,202	1,865,908
percent	18.2%	12.6%	29%	39.7%

30. Wollen, p. 46.

31. The two films have striking parallels: a homespun protagonist, a lawyer, who uses folksy humor to advance his goals, can sniff out hidden secrets, and who is alone now separated from a deceased love. Both films trade in a sentimental populism, portray community celebrations based in patriotism, and end in dramatic trials with villains caught out and the suffering innocents vindicated, family reunited, young lovers brought together, and morality affirmed.

32. Of course he did ask this very question of her during his visit to the farm.

33. Quote in Balio, p.2, summarizing Thorpe’s findings.

34. What would they think of *Iron Chef* or other cooking competition TV shows?  
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35. At least according to my late mother-in-law’s copy of *The Way to a Man’s Heart: The Settlement Cook Book* by Mrs. Simon (Lizzie Black) Kander, first published in 1901, it went through 34 editions and sold over 2 million copies, eventually. This was the go-to cookbook of my late mother-in-law, Sylvia Lewis Lesage, who got her copy shortly after marriage and moving from New York to small town Illinois in the 1930s. Written by a progressive German Jewish social activist from Milwaukee, the cuisine rested solidly in Central European dishes. The message in the title was enacted daily.

When the next event at the fairgrounds begins (three hours later according to the posted schedule), the Tug O’War, Lincoln is shown as still finishing a huge quarter of a pie.

36. Bertrand Tavernier referenced by Bill Rout in a discussion of *YML* in *Screening the Past*, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/07/ford-at-fox/>

37. See also in this issue, Deborah Tudor, “[The hysteric, the mother, the natural gal: male fantasies and male theories in films about Lincoln.](#)”

38. *Cahiers* actually misidentifies her. But the obvious (to any woman) fact that she is a mother, a wife, there with her husband and baby at her side makes the intrusion particularly hostile.

39. There’s another faulty dimension to Cass that would be clear to any fashion police. He and his buddy Scrub wear outlandish garb such as bold plaid and checkered pants.

40. Significant parts of both the “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” essay and the *YML* one are obvious paraphrases of Macherey’s book.

41. For an elaboration of applying Barthes’ literary study to film, see Julia Lesage’s essay, “[S/Z and Rules of the Game](#),” republished in this issue of



42. Of course some of *Cahiers* reading/misreading may simply be due to cross-cultural difference. Highly dramatic trials are a genuine possibility in the U.S. justice system, both through the structure of the legal process, the basis in law, and the practice of law. *Cahiers* does note trial scenes as a significant element in classic Hollywood cinema. The French legal system operates in a very different way with much less room for courtroom theatrics.

43. The song, originally composed about John Brown, combines patriotic sentiment with war-like militancy referring to Christian Judgment Day. It was central to the North's righteousness during the War and has remained a favorite Protestant hymn.

44. Widely available in different concert recordings and DVDs; a favorite on YouTube.

45. For example Roland Barthes, working at the time with the *Theatre populaire* (people's theater) movement, wrote enthusiastically in favor of Brecht, and the German playwright attracted a powerful intellectual, Bernard Dort, who wrote about the theatrical work and who also wrote for *Cahiers*.

46. Detailed in dissertations by Lellis, and Lesage.

47. In the United States, particularly coming from Central European exiles and intellectuals more aware of German thought, this was shaped by what is now called the "Brecht-Lukacs debate."

48. Seeing the contrast helps explain the extreme negative reaction to *Cahiers* and company by Bazin's most devoted champions such as Dudley Andrew. See biblio and Bill Horrigan, "Andre Bazin's Destiny." *Jump Cut*.19 (1978). Web.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC19folder/BazinHorriganRev.html>

49. A good example can be found in Sylvia Harvey's book: a 1972 article on "Film Journals and Politics" from the major Paris newspaper, *Le Monde*. [[return to page 5](#)]

50. There is a complex set of antagonistic relations and explosive events surrounding *Screen*, its parent organization, The Society for Education in Film and Television, and the British Film Institute and its Education Department at this point in time. For details: Nowell-Smith (2012), Grieveson (2008), and Bolas (2009).

51. At the time there were likely only a few dozen actual copies of that issue of *Screen* in the United States. Thus, writing for the best known and wide-circulation U.S. film journal, it made sense to reproduce large sections of the British translation.

52. Unfortunately for his credibility, in the earlier book he misspells "Cinéthique" as "Cinétique" (a mistake continued by Robert Stam in his *Film Theory: An Introduction*, and by Ian Aitkin in *European Film Theory and Cinema*).

53. Reference here, "of course," Bordwell's discussion of normalizing discourse in his *Making Meaning*.